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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis/Project

Immigrant Youth Ministry:

Identity Formation

And

Second-Generation Church of South India Young People

BY

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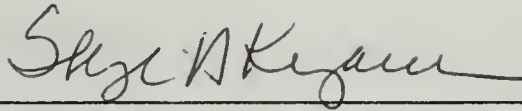
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Thesis Abstract

This thesis focuses on the racial and religious identity development of second-generation Kerala Christian Americans belonging to the Church of South India (CSI) congregations in North America. The primary purpose of this study is to develop ways to carry out ethnic youth ministry that would be sensitive to the ethnic identity formation of second-generation young people. In the exploration of such a ministry, this study makes the assertion that ethnic identity development of these young people should be not only a theological imperative but also a paramount component of youth ministry of both ethnic and mainstream churches. The study is based on interviews with fifteen second-generation Indian American adolescents at two Church of South India congregations in greater New York City, as well as from what I observed during participation in worship services, youth meetings and home visitations.

The second-generation Indian Americans of our sub-group develop their identity in the cloistered environment of their homes and in the Church of South India congregations, transplanted from Kerala by their parents. For the immigrant parents, the racial and religious identities are wrapped up in their being a Syrian Christian CSI community. The study makes two observations: one, ethnic church is seen and used by immigrant families as a refuge from the external polluting influences of moral decay and turpitude, and two, it is viewed as the sole guarantor of keeping the distinctness of their values and culture intact. Brought up in this environment, the second-generation young people grow into assuming this as their identity and liking it. However, I postulate that neither having been challenged in the crucible of American mainstream society nor having undergone a crisis experience, the second-generation adoption of ethnic identity

should perhaps be viewed as rather premature. Notwithstanding the value and primacy of their ethnic identity, its formation has occurred in an environment where countervailing forces were not allowed to participate and compete. I conclude that, as a result, the second-generation Indian Americans of our sub-group are at a disadvantage and vulnerable as they enter the world of adulthood and assume responsibilities in mainstream society. Have the CSI young people developed sufficient skills in negotiating with competing views, values and norms of the host culture? Do they fully participate in their ethnic community, share its values, and value its traditions, or, do they only symbolically participate by adopting certain external symbols?

This study will attempt to understand the experience of these young people from a theological perspective. It will offer some suggestions for future research and identify areas for further exploration. It will also make some recommendations for the ethnic and mainstream churches to engage in youth ministry.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF DISPLCEMENT AND RECOVERY	12
3. LITERATURE REVIEW: RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY FORMATION.....	26
4. INTERVIEWS.....	37
5. IDENTITY FORMATION: A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION.....	46
6. MAINSTREAM CHURCH AND IMMIGRANT YOUTH MINISTRY.....	74
APPENDIX	91
Interview Format	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	93

Chapter One

Introduction

Rationale

There are two reasons for my interest in the study of identity development in second-generation young people born to Christian parents who immigrated from Kerala, India, to the United States. First, as the father of two children who were born and brought up here, I, a Christian from Kerala, India, was naturally interested in seeing my children grow up in the Christian faith in this new place which I call home. I did not find rearing them up in the Christian faith alone posed a challenge for me, initially at least, because of the predominant Christian culture in the United States. However, the values, traditions and heritage that formed my Christian upbringing and shaped the contours of my formative years were not easily available for the formation of my children. I often wondered if I had made the right decision in coming to this country and then deciding to stay here and raise a family. Did I commit a Faustian mistake, gaining the opportunity for material well-being in exchange for the risk of losing my family?

Another important reason, as a person who has recently entered the process of ordination for holy orders in the Episcopal Church, I often think about my understanding of the ministry to which God has called me. I also think about why is it that I am pursuing ordination in the Episcopal Church, and not in an Indian Church. I was born and brought up in India, a former British colony. The Church I was baptized into was Mar Thoma Syrian Church, an ancient tradition that claims its history goes back to the

first century. There are many like myself living here with their families and children making this place their home. The Indian community, with their American-born children, has its own places of worship and cultural gathering. The Indian Christian community in the greater Boston area alone boasts seven or eight different places of worship including the Church of South India congregation, which meets once a month. While my family and I are communicant members of the local Episcopal congregation, we also worship at this CSI congregation.

For many of us, raising children in a culture different from the one we grew up in is a new experience, and as we lack parents or any role models to follow. For our children, it feels like growing up in two cultures, parental culture at home and mainstream culture at school. This duality a tremendous problem for our families, causing some families to go back to India. For us, there have been two models of adaptation to choose from: isolation, which means remaining outside of the influences of the dominant society or assimilation, which means submerging into the dominant group and losing one's own identity. Depending on age, education, place of residence and a host of other variables, we choose to follow one of these two models. However, as our children grow, fault lines begin to appear in the social landscape of our immigrant community, challenging our earlier naive assumptions about our new home and our simplistic notions of adaptation. We realize that we are learning as we go along in these uncharted waters. No one has the answer. We are by and large groping in the dark.

My sense of call to the ministry partially has to do with a burden I feel for this new generation of Indian Americans, including my own children. The priests who are

sent from India for a brief period, being new to the area and not having enough time to learn about the context, are ill-equipped to deal with problems families and individuals face in their daily struggle. Families are left to their own imagination and creativity to solve their emotional, spiritual and social problems. I believe that for the ministry to be effective, it should be contextualized. The transplanted notions of ministry from back home have proved inadequate to meet the challenges and struggles of our families and communities in this post-modern society. I realized that for my ordination as well as for my future ministry I should approach a church that recognizes the radical shift from a traditional to a post-modern society. At this stage in my formation and developing pastoral identity, I am drawn closer to the spirituality offered by the Episcopal Church.

Context

Since the landmark Civil Rights Act legislation of 1965 and the subsequent relaxation in immigration, an unprecedented number and diversity of immigrants from Asian countries began to arrive to the United States. Among them are a sizable number of Christian immigrants from Kerala, India. In the last three decades their number has grown considerably. According to one source, at the beginning of 1995, the number of Asian-Indian Christians was estimated to be between 110,000 and 125,000, the majority of whom are from Kerala.¹ Unlike other immigrants from India, the subjects of our study are Christians, albeit from a different strand. The temptation to assimilate into this Judeo-Christian culture is felt more by these Asian-Indian Christians than by their non-Christian Indian counterparts.

One of the many daunting issues facing the mainstream churches in North America today is the challenge posed by the ever-increasing ethnic diversity of North American demography. Never before in its North American history has the church confronted a challenge as large as this in its scope or as promising as this in its opportunity for growth. One of the ways the church will continue to be relevant to society in the new century will depend, in part, on how it will address the issue of incorporating the new influx of immigrants into the mainstream congregations. Statistical studies show that many of today's adult churchgoers have had earlier childhood and adolescent religious education and exposure in churches.² Will it be possible to say the same thing about today's immigrant children when they become adults and responsible members of larger society? It depends on how the mainstream church will see these second-generation young people, whether Christian or not, and minister to them.

Objective

My interest in the identity formation of second-generation children led me to choose it as the subject of this thesis. The broad aim of my research is to study the role of mainstream churches in the development of racial and religious identity in second-generation immigrants. Of particular interest to this paper is the narrow goal of seeing how the American-born children of Christian immigrant parents from Kerala, India, develop their racial and religious identity in the U.S. The underlying objective of this study is to develop some guidelines for the mainstream churches to enter into a mission of being a mentoring community to the second-generation ethnic adolescents.

Chapter Summary

I approach the subject first by tracing the course of my own identity development over the years through the present. In the second chapter, I will discuss my growing up in India, sense of call to ministry, moving to the United States, seeking community and my eventual decision to seek priesthood in the Episcopal Church. For a nation that prides itself as one built by the immigrants, it is not a surprise to see that a voluminous amount of literature has been devoted to the experience of immigrants who have come to these shores over the years. In the third chapter, I will sift through the literature and offer a quick review of current literature relevant to the subject of racial and spiritual identity development of children born of Christian immigrant parents from Kerala, India. This should help me to find out what is lacking in current discussions on the subject and to locate a space for further exploration. Much of my learning comes from watching my own children and observing their cohorts, so it is only fitting that I devote the fourth chapter to what I have learned from youth and young adults. This has been accomplished through conducting surveys of young people and in-depth interviews with fifteen young people ranging from ages 15 through 25. In the fifth chapter, I will attempt to explore the racial and religious identity of this sample group from a theological perspective. The concluding chapter is devoted to offering some directions for the future, especially in relation to the mainstream church's ministry among the children of immigrant groups.

Definitions

For the purposes of this thesis the following explanations and definitions pertain to frequently used names and terms:

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process or result of adopting the traits, habits, norms, or customs of another group through lengthy or continuous interaction. It is the degree to which an individual chooses to conform to the dominant group or culture.³

Assimilation

Assimilation is process of one ethnic group adopting another group's (usually the dominant) way of living, values, habits, norms, or customs without critical reflection or thought to the point of complete loss one's own uniqueness.

The Church of South India (CSI)

The Church of South India (CSI) is a union of the Anglican Church and three post-Reformation traditions of the West (Presbyterian, Congregational, and Wesleyan Methodist) in India. It was formed on September 27, 1948, shortly after India became independent. This union of episcopal and non-episcopal churches within the structure of an episcopal church was termed by the World Council of Churches the greatest event in the history of the Christian Church since the Reformation. It came into being as the result of twenty-eight years of negotiations between the constituent churches in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Divided into 21 dioceses, with 1,345 presbyters serving 8,715 congregations, the CSI boasts 1,718,265 baptized members. The Central Kerala Diocese is the largest diocese within the CSI and most of

the CSI immigrants in the United States belong to this diocese. It is in communion with the Church of North India and the Mar Thoma Church.⁴

The Church of North India (CNI)

The Church of North India came into being in 1970 as a union of the Anglican Church, the United Church of North India (union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians dating from 1924), some Baptists, the Church of the Brethren, the Disciples of Christ, and the Methodist Church linked with Britain and Australia. Among the Indian Christian immigrants, the number of CNI members is not significant.⁵

Culture

The collective behavior patterns, communication styles, beliefs, concepts, values, institutions, standards, and other factors unique to a community that are socially transmitted to individuals and to which individuals are expected to conform.⁶

Ethnic

Of or relating people grouped according to a common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin. People who share a sense of group identity because of these factors.⁷

Ethnicity

A sense of togetherness shared by members of a group linked through cultural tradition, ancestry, national origin, history, or religion.⁸

First-Generation Immigrant

Throughout this thesis I interchange first-generation immigrants with parents' generation. The person, who first emigrated from the country of his/her birth to come and settle in the United States is a first-generation immigrant.

Identity

Identity may be defined as a social construction of one's being in relation to the given reality of surrounding environment and acculturating influences. Perceptions and understanding of self are achieved through internalization of religious and secular beliefs as well as any social cues. Racial identity entails coming to terms with one's own race in relation to the context or environment. Assimilation into society with a strong sense of identity would be the ideal condition, and this was largely possible for European immigrants. The newer immigrants, in response to the racism they experience in society, tend to be low on assimilation and high on identity.

Kerala

Kerala State, located on the southern tip of India, bordering the Arabian Sea on the west and Western Ghats on the east, is the home of 29 million people (548 per sq. km.), making it one of most overcrowded places in the world. Lack of an industrial base keeps the state's unemployment rate very high. According to one estimate, over 1.9 million Keralites live outside of India and 5.2 million in other parts of India. Kerala is also one of the most advanced states in India as it boasts a 100% literacy rate and the lowest infant mortality (19.5) and birth rates in India. It is also considered one of the most progressive states in India because of the land reform initiated by the first ever

democratically elected Communist government in the world. Kerala has the largest Christian population in India, and this has resulted in the establishment of many educational institutions and hospitals. The combination of factors involving high literacy among both men and women, English as the medium of education, lack of industries and high unemployment has caused massive emigration to other parts of the world, including Gulf Countries, Europe and the United States. The immigrants are in search of better opportunities. *Malayalam* is the spoken language of Kerala and so the people from Kerala are also called *Malayalees*. Most of the Malayalees who immigrated to the United States are active Christians with high educational achievement and professional qualifications, largely concentrated on the East Coast, and in Texas and California. As these immigrants are well prepared, educated, and professionally qualified, there is no time lost between the time of their arrival and their entry into the job market.⁹

Multicultural

Being multicultural is a state, which allows the co-existence of many distinct cultures within a given context, such as a community or nation. It is an approach through which genuine pluralism is achieved. It is a process, which envisions a society that does not allow hierarchic structures of dominant and dominated cultures.¹⁰ Multiculturalism is a concept that allows a person to be who she or he is. Differences are not just permitted but celebrated and affirmed.

Pluralism

A state of society in which members of diverse gender, ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain autonomous participation in both a common civilization and in

separate cultural lines.¹¹ In separate groups, members may express their deepest identities, and in public domain, members are expected to follow the basis of rational principles that all groups can accept. The European immigrant assimilation into the American culture took place at a time when 'basis of rational principles that all groups can accept' was not challenged. Today, however, non-European immigrants interact with the public domain in a way that would affect the both the larger society and the ethnic community. This encounter of the ethnic groups with the mainstream is a constant and dynamic process, which is mutually beneficial.

Second-Generation Immigrant

Strictly speaking, a child who is born to the first-generation immigrant and lives here is a second-generation immigrant. However, for my study I also interviewed a young person who came to this country as a dependent at a very young age.

Spiritual Identity

Spiritual identity is a self-concept shaped by one's belief systems about visible and invisible realities that are held to be sacred.

Syrian Christians

Christians in Kerala trace their history through the centuries to Saint Thomas, one of the disciples of Christ. It is believed that he traveled to India in the first century, preached the gospel and converted a few Brahmin families. According to the tradition, these early converts established churches in different parts of Kerala, and today's Kerala Christians believe that they are descendents of the early converts of Saint Thomas. In the

intervening centuries, these Christians were visited by bishops and leaders from Syria who introduced the Syriac language and rites to help with the worship. As a result, the Saint Thomas Christians are also called Syrian Christians. At different points in its history, the descendents of these early Christians were influenced by foreign visitors and missionaries of different persuasions. Today, one would find Christians belonging to this tradition in all Christian denominations in Kerala.

End Notes

¹ Raymond Brady Williams, *Christian Pluralism in the United States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39

² Robert Wuthnow, "Religious Upbringing: Does It Matter And If so, What Matters?" In *Christ And The Adolescent: A Theological Approach To Youth Ministry*, The 1996 Princeton Lectures On Youth, Church, And Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N. J. (1996), 79.

³ For definition on Acculturation, see *Diversity Awareness: Workshop Manual*. ed., Tasha Lebow. Developed by the Michigan Metro Girl Scout Council and Programs for Educational Opportunity, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1992), p. 59.

⁴ Williams, *Christian Pluralism*. P. 53

⁵ Ibid., p.87

⁶ For definition on Culture, see *Diversity Awareness: Workshop Manual*. ed., Tasha Lebow. Developed by the Michigan Metro Girl Scout Council and Programs for Educational Opportunity, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1992), p. 59.

⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

⁹ Williams, *Christian Pluralism*, p.39.

¹⁰ For definition on multicultural , see *Diversity Awareness: Workshop Manual*. ed., Tasha Lebow. Developed by the Michigan Metro Girl Scout Council and Programs for Educational Opportunity, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1992), p. 59

¹¹ Ibid., p.61.

Chapter Two

Personal Experience of Displacement and Recovery

Introduction

I am a “hyphenated” American. I am an Asian-Indian-Syrian-Christian by birth, upbringing, and culture and an American by citizenship and having lived most of my adult life in the United States where I was married and am raising a family. I love my heritage, steeped in rich Syrian Christian culture and ancient wisdom. And I love also the new home that I intentionally chose for its dynamism, freedom and the idea of democracy. Can I assume multiple identities? Or, are these identities mutually exclusive?

In the early seventies, when I left India for the United States for studies, I was not sure that I would eventually settle down here and raise a family. Though my father was excited about my going to the United States, he was concerned about the possibility of my being assimilated into the American culture. He was afraid that he might lose me, from my not being there to uphold the family name, cultural values and our Syrian Christian heritage. For me both the letting go of what was familiar, sure, and secure in the place of my birth and formative years and the tentative embracing of the unknowns of a new place and culture were not easy.

Growing Up Privileged

My birth and growing up in a middle class Syrian Christian family in Kerala assured me certain privileges of a dominant group, since Syrian Christians wielded a socio-economic, political and cultural power disproportionate to their number. It would serve one well in getting admissions to schools, being hired as an employee, or even

getting lenient judgements in the court system. Moreover, one did not think of it as an exploitative system. In the early years of growing up in Kerala, identity was not something that I was concerned about as I was part of the “norm and privileged.” I remember vividly an incident when I was a fourth grader in school. Once after the classes were over, I brought home a friend from school to play. After some time when my mother saw me playing with this boy, she asked him about his parents, what they did and where they lived. Then she called me to the kitchen and told me to quickly send him home and that I should not bring home any more friends who belonged to the low-caste community. She told me the child I was playing with was the son of our *dhobi* (laundress). At that time I was too young to realize the cruelty of the racism and *casteism* that we, the dominant group, used to practice in Kerala. However, this incident left an unpleasant impression in my young mind.

By the time I was in college, the under-privileged and backward communities had become more conscious of their civil and political rights under the constitution, and they demanded an end to the caste-based discrimination and abuses against them in Kerala. For the first time the institution of the church also was brought to a self-critical analysis and assessment of its political, cultural, and spiritual identity. I remember our local church youth group’s criticism of the church hierarchy for not following the teachings of Jesus, especially in their treatment of the backward communities in our area. In college, I participated in political rallies and meetings, though I was not fully convinced of the merits of the issues that we fought for. Upon reflection today, it appears that some of that early activism were not well thought out or substantive. I also volunteered my time and

worked with a national social service agency in distributing food and medicine to the needy and homeless in poorer areas of the city. It was through these engagements and as a member of the church youth group that I began to see my place and self in the context of the environment. Just having completed the bachelors' degree program, I was expected to find a job and be financially helpful to my father. However, contrary to my parents' wishes, I was sensing a pull toward some form of work in a social or religious organization. I had already made a secret pledge to myself earlier at the funeral service of my grandfather, a devout Christian and a dedicated priest. However, I did not have the nerve to tell this to my parents who had high hopes of my being able to help them financially with all the family obligations. As I was weighing with these conflicting notions of vocation, I came to find out about opportunities for study abroad, possibly with full scholarship. The idea was attractive to my parents also. Within a short period, I was admitted with a full scholarship to study religion in a college in the United States.

Crossing Geographical Borders And Experiencing Spiritual Crisis

I came to do my studies at a Bible college in Columbia, South Carolina, a place very different from what I had envisioned. It gave me such a cultural shock that I did not want to leave my dorm room for several days. The college was mostly white, except for the few international students from different parts of the world and two or three black day students from the South. I felt strange and out of place, especially when people started telling me about their born-again experiences with the precise date and time that they were saved. The literal interpretation of the Bible, the idea of faith being exclusively a personal matter, and the understanding of the doctrine of sanctification as separation from

society, all seemed odd to me. Questioning or challenging these positions and doctrines was not only not allowed but was thought to be the work of Satan. The first couple of years of my life in this school and in the fundamentalist Christian culture were like being caught in a doctrinal washing machine. I began to doubt my own feelings and myself. I hated myself for having any contrary thoughts, and prayed to God that he would make it easy for me to conform to the positions of the school. I spent many days and nights worrying about my own salvation, and I was continuing to experience the urge to question everything. There was increasing pressure on me to join one of the missionary organizations saving souls for Christ in India. However, despite all the pressures and guilt trips I was subjected to during this period, I kept my sanity and survived. Though it was a painfully devastating experience, I could see how this period had been instructive and formative for me. This led me to reflect on the validity of my experience of God's grace mediated to me during my upbringing in my church and community while growing up in India. Until then I had never been confronted with my own spiritual identity. After the initial crisis of faith, I experienced a better understanding of the process of conversion, which began during my youth in India. I rejected the notion of separating myself from my past, my family, culture and tradition. As I looked back, I could see the spirit of God leading me through this low point in my life.

Upon receiving my diploma from the Bible College, I went to a Southern Baptist seminary in Texas. Although theologically this place was not any different from the Bible School, I enjoyed a freedom that I did not have before and was able to develop outside contacts. I felt I needed a new vision, a new challenge, and a new direction. I knew I

would be only wasting my time if I stayed on at this seminary. This led me to Princeton Theological Seminary.

Spiritual And Racial Identity And Transformation

I felt at home at Princeton, which gave me what I was looking for and more. However, in the beginning it was somewhat disconcerting, as I had not fully recovered from the catatonic feeling of my fundamentalist exposure. It felt, at Princeton, there was nothing that was theologically off limits. This sudden change I was experiencing was at first faith-shattering. What I considered sacred and basic to my faith from my childhood was suddenly fair game for open discussion and debates. However, the shock did not last long. For the first time, I did not feel guilty for challenging a triple-decker theory of Christian cosmology. Freedom to discuss honestly the disturbing aspects I came across as I engaged in textual criticism of the Bible was refreshing and uplifting. I did not have to defend God and apologize about the Bible any more. This was also the time I was introduced to the field of "Church and Society." I tremendously enjoyed and was transformed by the courses offered by professors Gibson Winter and Richard Shaull. Once again the gospel became alive and liberating. I began to look at my own life in the light of the freedom in Christ. I began to see my spiritual identity as a Christian in terms of my identification with the ones whom Jesus came to redeem.

Challenging existing oppressive structures was not just something I read for a liberation theology course. As international students, some of us thought we were being treated by the seminary as the objects of its charity. So we, both students from first world as well as third world, organized a meeting and asked the president of the seminary to

meet with us to hear our demands. We were successful in meeting with the president and making our presentation. Whether it made any real change in the attitude of the school is another story.

While at Princeton, I began a romantic relationship with one of my white female classmates. Until this time, I had been fighting off intimacy in relationships. Being a dutiful son, I had given my word to my father that I would not enter into any intimate relationship with someone outside of our Syrian Christian community. One of the things that worries most of our parents is what would happen to the continuity of tradition and family name if children marry outside of their particular tradition. I felt as if I were on a short leash. Entering into a romantic relationship with someone outside of my community meant that I was breaking the leash and venturing out of the clearly defined boundaries. However, as I continued this relationship I started to experience a freedom to challenge the validity of some of our social constructs, especially with respect to race and culture.

Dating a white woman made me for the first time conscious of my own race. Visiting her family brought home the depth of our cultural differences. What would have gone unnoticed with respect to race and culture was all of a sudden brought to sharper focus and clearer understanding. In the end, however, it was the doubt about our own resolve to withstand the seemingly irreconcilable family opposition that brought our relationship to a close. In retrospect, I feel that this relationship, though short-lived, had helped me become aware of my uniqueness as an individual, my racial identity and my capacity for love and intimacy. Not long after this relationship ended, I married my wife,

who came from the same Syrian Christian community as I did. It must have fulfilled my father's wish as well.

Finding Community And Discerning Vocation

For a few months following marriage and graduation I visited India for the first time since I coming to the United States for studies. It seemed that India had undergone so many rapid social changes in the intervening years. I felt a distance from the middle class, whose lives had changed for the better, and a sense of sadness at the plight of the poor, whose condition I thought had grown worse. I became skeptical and impatient of the mainstream church. Though the institutional church was engaged in ministry among the poor in India, it did not identify with the poor and their suffering.

Regarding vocation I was still not committed. Upon returning from India, I declined an offer to serve as an assistant pastor at a large urban Presbyterian parish in Philadelphia, as I somehow felt not ready for an ordained ministry. I wanted more time to think about ordination and a vocation that would last a lifetime. Until I could figure this out, I thought I would do some transitional jobs. For the next several years I held different jobs with no plans to build a career at any place where I worked.

Meanwhile I stayed active in a local faith community as a layperson. During my years at the Bible College, I had longed for a faith community. I had felt isolated and marginalized, especially as a result of my unwillingness to let go of my tradition and culture and embrace the fundamentalist system of belief, whereas at Princeton, I had found a community that was strong and affirming. The church where I did my fieldwork also provided community. To belong, I did not have to give up my past. Instead, my past,

tradition and culture were celebrated and affirmed. I believe this type of community is integral to a person's identity development. After my wife and I came to Massachusetts, where we settled and raised our family, we were blessed with such communities. As soon as we moved here, the local Episcopal priest visited with us and invited us to be part of his congregation, and this marked the beginning of our present relationship with the Episcopal Church.

Affirmation of Call to Ministry

The Episcopal congregation where we worshipped offered its space for our ethnic congregation to hold its monthly worship. We kept dual membership, in the local mainstream church and in the ethnic Church of South India congregation, and both churches provided for our need to be in community. Recognizing my gifts and theological education, they looked to me for leadership. I did everything I could as a non-ordained person for the spiritual growth of these communities. Over the years, many members in the CSI community have urged me to seek ordination so that I can provide them with ordained leadership. This led to my making the initial steps toward ordained ministry. The recognition of my gifts for spiritual leadership by the members of our faith communities and the need for ordained leadership in the CSI Congregation, as well as my own sense of calling to ministry, all pointed toward ordination. As I talked to various members of our community and to the members of the mainstream congregation, it became clearer to me that I should seek ordination in the Episcopal Church. I found their overwhelming support very affirming. Seeking ordination at this point in my life required me to make significant changes in my family's life. Disruption in lifestyle and

ensuing difficulties were all anticipated. As it is with any turning point in life, these are to be expected.

Formation of Pastoral Identity

When I visualize myself as a priest in a faith community, the image that comes to my mind is that of my grandfather. He was a man of faith and prayer, and he was blessed with the gift of healing. He had a remarkable ministry. He was courageous when he faced opposition from the church hierarchy. He stood firm and did what he thought was right and just. Since my mother had passed away when I was only four years old, he had taken my brother and me under his special care. I recall vividly the short walks I had with Grandpa along the banks of a small river next to his house, and afterward, he would take me to his prayer room and pray. As a young boy, this relationship with Grandpa made me special. I finished high school the year he died. I remember, standing next to his coffin, making myself a promise that one day I would become a priest like him. His memory continues to have a powerful influence on me.

Another person who influenced me was our parish priest, the Rev. P. T. Thomas. I remember him as a very active and energetic person. He challenged people to think differently. He did not shy away from controversy and look for cover. He dared the hierarchy to be just in its decisions and policies. As he continued to be a thorn in the side of the vested interests in the church, he was marginalized and forced to leave the church. Among professors who influenced me most was Richard Shaull at Princeton. I was attracted to his simple life style, his sense of solidarity with the people of base communities of South America. I did not see him as a professor. I saw him as a

colleague, an equal. He challenged us to create new images and symbols so that our faith could relate to the human situation today.

In retrospect, I can confidently say that the times I felt I grew more than at any other times were when I was part of a faith community. Being part of a faith community is crucial to one's spiritual growth. Part of being faithful has to do with living in faith in relation to the world context. My main criticism of the fundamentalist Christianity to which I was exposed to at the Bible College was its view of salvation as a personal matter between the individual and God, and as an end in itself with no resultant transformation and change in the social milieu. By selectively divorcing itself from the social problems in the world, it purports individualism and personal success using scriptures for validation. Though I memorized dozens of Bible verses, studied the Bible, and learned to do personal evangelism using simple spiritual laws, my education at the Bible College did not transform me, because of the absence of a contextual world in the equation. The broader faith community we are part of often fails to communicate the message we carry because of our lack of engagement with the world. A bifurcation of some sort exists between the world of "spiritually-oriented" church people and the world out there. This chasm was most evident for me when I was at the Bible college.

My spiritual formation informs me that the role of the faith community is like that of the salt in its environs, an inconspicuous presence making a noticeable qualitative difference. When education is viewed only as transferring information or technique to achieve a certain goal, it loses its primary purpose of transformation of individuals and communities. Evangelism means making a difference in the lives of the people and

bringing about transformation in communities of people, rather than filling the pews of churches. Both in India and in the United States, I experienced growth as a Christian when I was part of a community committed to being transformed. It was within these communities that my spiritual gifts were developed and recognized. It was the affirmation I received from the community that led me to seek ordination. These communities continue to assist in my spiritual and pastoral identity formation.

I often asked myself why, for someone who sensed a call to ministry at very young age, did it take this long to commit myself to seek ordination? There is no one reason for it. I could recite a number of factors, motivations and feelings that attributed to it. Topping them all has been finances and the fear of being poor. My grandfather was poor. His parents sent him to law school; however, after one year there, he quit law school and joined a seminary, shortly thereafter becoming a priest in Mar Thoma Church. With his eleven children, what he was getting as salary from the church was not anywhere near what was needed to support his family. He had relied on his siblings for financial help. I was named after him. Touched by his life, faith and ministry, I secretly made a promise to myself to become a priest. My vision of a priest will always be colored by my image of grandfather. Though his was a full and productive life, materially he was poor and in need. Because of this, I have always been ambivalent about my decision to seek ordination.

Being a dutiful son to my father and pleasing him also played a role in my adult choices, including ordination. Though he was loving and caring, he was extremely coercive without being aware of it. It was he who decided that I would go to college and

in what subject I would major. Had I stayed in India, much more would have been decided by him. However, even after leaving India, I still felt his influence in my decision-making. He was not fond of my idea of going into ministry, as it would not be financially a viable option for our family and me. Still, the idea of coming to the United States for studies had its advantages. So he was for it. In my recent decision to seek ordination, I agonized over whether to maintain the status quo by continuing to do what I have been doing or to disturb the peace and go for ordination. It was a decision I had to make between the choices characterized by my father's practical realism and my grandfather's leap of faith.

Reflection

Making a decision in favor of ordination is easier now than it ever was before. I can say that it is the culmination of the transformation I experienced while I was at Princeton. Emboldened by what I was studying in religion and society courses offered by Gibson Winter and the liberation theology program led by Richard Shaull, I began to take an active role in determining my own destiny. What is handed down to me in the name of tradition, culture, religion, all must pass the litmus test of whether they are oppressive or liberative to those at the receiving end. In my case, entering into a loving relationship with an "outsider" was liberating. I knew that I was going against my father's wish. Being involved in this relationship despite parental disapproval for me was a sign of my ability to exert my right of self-determination. This was perhaps the first time I openly went against my father's wish. Education's transformational power was happening within me.

Real transformation must start with me. Princeton Theological Seminary itself provided the venue to test out my liberation and transformation. I was able to organize the international students at Princeton Seminary to protest against what we thought to be an unhealthy power relationship between the school administration and us. Ironically, even my decision not to accept ordination and priesthood at the end of seminary education had to do with this transformation I experienced. I needed more time to process my motivation in pursuing the whole ordination idea. The fact that everybody else was doing it and that it was easier at that time did not appeal to me. The decision to do anything, especially something as important as ordination, should be born out of transformational experience.

Conclusion

My hyphenated identity is the result of several border crossings. Each time I cross borders, I add a new identity to myself and become richer and fuller. Today, I am an Asian, Indian, American, Kerala Syrian Christian, Church of South India member, Episcopalian and soon-to-be-ordained-priest. Immigrant experience can be enriched, if it goes beyond mere geographical crossing. Faith communities, whether ethnic or mainstream, can serve one as a base or as a hideout. Using community as a hideout prevents one from crossing borders. And in order to cross borders and embrace “the other,” one does not need to let go of his or her identity. Such border crossings allow one to have a multi-layered identity. The Church of South India second-generation youth find themselves at the border more so than their parents’ generation. In the following chapters

we will examine how border crossing can be a liberating experience by reclaiming and strengthening identities.

Chapter Three

Literature Review: Racial And Religious Identity Formation

My attempt to review literature that deals with the specific topic of our inquiry, namely the formation of racial and religious identity among the second-generation born of Christian immigrant parents from the southern part of India, has made me realize that only very little has been written on the subject. However, the search has led me to a wide array of literature that discusses the formation of cultural identity, which includes both spiritual and racial identities among immigrant youth from differing backgrounds. While lessons can be gleaned from these works to suit some of the needs of our specific population, they are not specific enough to preclude the need for a separate study.

The pattern of adaptation of new immigrants into American society has been different for different successive waves of immigrants to the United States¹. Aronson holds that the ethnic and cultural identity developments of any group of people depend both on the historical and political contexts in which it finds itself and on their view of the condition and direction of society². The earliest model, popularly known as the 'melting pot theory,' developed during the national concern over European immigration, predicted a "race relations cycle" of "contact, accommodation, assimilation," and ultimate "amalgamation" into American society through interracial marriage and social interaction³. However, assuming a "straight-line theory" of assimilation based on one-way process of acculturation into the dominant society, this theory fell short in predicting the outcome for Asian immigrants and their subsequent experience.

In contrast, the new immigrant adaptation since the 1960s reveals a shift from the earlier pattern of the host society influencing the socialization to a pattern of new immigrants taking active roles in deciding the extent of their adaptation into the society. As a result, the pluralism concept of the earlier times has been democratized; the dichotomy between the old and the new has been blurred, and a resurgence of the ethnic pride of the previously colonized people has been established. It is ironic that at a time when the homogenizing concept of globalism and the integrating means of mass media are having their maximum influence in the United States, there is also on the part of new immigrants an intensification of assertiveness of their uniqueness and differences.⁴ This development, though not contrary to the visions of the pluralism concept, is in conflict with the way pluralism has been practiced, namely, “the melting pot” process of assimilation. “The new immigration that has been entering the United States since the 1970s has developed an acculturation strategy dramatically different from that of its European predecessors. This change has profound implications for the concept of pluralism and the course of intergroup relations in America.”⁵

In the modern context, the earlier vision of pluralism is thought to be better achieved through the process of multiculturalism, expressed in culinary term as “the salad bowl theory.” We live today in a multi-cultural society with our multi-cultural identities. We are known differently to different people, depending on the time of day and the crowd we are with. Unlike the case of previous immigrants of European origin, for the new immigrants full assimilation into the existing society has not been an option because of their racial features and religious backgrounds.⁶ About this shift, Kitano writes,

One common image associated with immigrants is of crowded boats, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, poverty, hard work, night school, and the Americanization of succeeding generations. This process, often referred to as the “European model” or “straight-line” theory, includes voluntary immigration, acculturation, integration, assimilation, and eventual absorption into the dominant society. This theory assumes that given sufficient time, anyone can become a part of the American mainstream by working hard, learning English and the American way, participating in the community, and blending into the mainstream. Those who do not are looked on as somehow lacking the motivation to become American.”⁷

Kitano identifies a two-tier system of acculturation into American society, one for Europeans into the mainstream, and the other for Asians into a second-class social status as non-whites. This second-class social structure they share with native Americans and African Americans, Latinos.

Moreover, the question of what criteria were used by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as to who would be eligible for immigration has had different answers at different periods in the American history based on the need for labor and the ethos of national politics. The dominant group determines the criteria based on how it would impact them. The “melting pot” process, advocated by the dominant group as a way of acculturation for any new arrivals, assumed eventual assimilation into American culture. However, this process proved to be more difficult in being applied to the non-European newer arrivals, who were allowed to come during the time of a tight labor market. To them assimilation without the benefit of being part of the mainstream is considered the same ploy used by their former colonizers back in their homelands a few years earlier. Politically astute and conscious, the emerging groups have opted instead the process of multiculturalism to achieve the ideal of pluralism.

Often the charge is made that to be multicultural is divisive and that we are in danger of Balkanizing ourselves as a nation. The emergence of multicultural

consciousness as a fundamental aspect of democracy is an attempt on the part of many people of goodwill in connection to their deepest sources to turn our society away from the dominant stories that in fact now divide us as a people based on race, gender, class, and other such issues. It is precisely the refusal of the dominant in the United States to see the four faces of the others in this country that so deeply divides us.⁸

A nation of subgroups each vying to assert themselves without understanding the others can be dangerous. Rubin writes,

The challenge to American pluralism brought about by the drive toward separatism of the new immigration is disturbing for two reasons. First, ethnic conflict is always a danger to a multigroup society, but the threat would appear to be greater where groups fail to develop understanding and respect for one another through constant interaction. It is true that interaction can produce tension where encounters are conflictual, but the expectation of American pluralism has always been that group encounters would take place in an atmosphere of rationality and mutual respect.”⁹

A multiculturally educated public and informed policy makers can avoid the danger of the many catastrophic confrontations that lurk within a multigroup nation like the United States. Regarding the importance of multicultural education, Gajendra K. Verma writes that,

..in any large complex society it is rare to find that the population is homogeneous. Most societies are demographically pluralistic, characterized by the presence of two or more distinct groups which are differentiated in terms of language, ethnic characteristics and/or cultural heritages. In spite of such diversity, many nation-states have failed to recognize and support the heterogeneity of its citizens. In a world of increasing interdependence – economically, socially and politically – the education system has an increasingly important role to play in maintaining, sustaining and, in many cases, changing our conceptions of the world about us and of identities and roles within particular nations in this modern age.¹⁰

The subgroup on whom the present study focuses are the children of immigrants who came to the United States since 1965, a time when less restrictive immigration laws have been in effect as a result of Civil Rights legislation. It was also a time of

remarkable growth in this country, and the labor market was tight. A large percentage of the new immigrants were from India, especially Christians from Kerala.

Chain migration is anchored in India in those areas having relatively large Christian populations, ones producing nurses and other technicians, and where the Christians have the education and linguistic ability in English to qualify for entry. The largest number of Christian immigrants is Keralites, Tamils, Telungu, Goans, and Gujaratis, with a smattering of representatives of other Indian regional-linguistic groups. The large majority, however, are from Kerala; indeed, most come from the fairly small central Travancore region.¹¹

The fact that these immigrants are Christians from India, which is predominantly Hindu, and the fact that they are Christians belonging to a different tradition from that of their counterparts in the host country provide a new set of dynamics in the acculturation process. Raymond Williams observes,

Each of these churches (*CSI and CNI*) is a territorial uniting church, so any concept of an extraterritorial diocese or the establishment of a separate denomination abroad is foreign to its genius and ethos. Nevertheless, members of both churches in America, especially of the larger CSI community, wish to maintain their identity and train their children within the context of language-based congregations..... Leaders in India and their own ecumenical ethos push CSI immigrants toward assimilation into American Christianity, especially into churches that are constituents of the uniting churches or in full communion with them. The need to preserve a living memory and a secure identity in the midst of the trauma of migration pulls them toward pluralism in congregations and toward national organizations identified with Indian churches.¹²

An Identity In The Making

In the push and pull of this debate whether to assimilate into the mainstream or to maintain separate identity by staying away, the children are often forgotten. At the crucial stage of their identity development, they are left to fend on their own. Are the Indian churches with ministers trained in India capable of providing young people the mentors they need? Can the churches, whether Indian or mainstream, help them sort out

their inquiries regarding racial and spiritual identity? What sort of support and help can they expect from the faith community they are part of as they continue to cross borders between parental and peer cultures and negotiate their way into developing their identity as Indian American Christians?

The current church ministry among immigrants is less than adequate. Though written from a British immigrant perspective, Anna Chakko-George's analysis concerning the youth ministry among immigrants in England speaks for the immigrant youth ministry in the United States as well.¹³ The obvious issue of the cultural and racial differences between the immigrant and mainstream communities, though recognized, is not dealt with, either for the sake of unity or because it is too difficult to handle. In the mainstream churches, the immigrant families are treated in a "colorblind" manner as if there existed no difference between them and the majority whites. "Colorblindness" is the legacy of the painful history of racism in America, and is identified as a new form of racism by Vallerie Batts.¹⁴ In her book *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* Beverly Tatum, talks about "colorblindness" as the result of an early socialization process in America.¹⁵ This "colorblind" approach would have the immigrant families continue to shed their particular characteristics and values and adopt more and more mainstream behaviors and values. After a while the newcomers become assimilated into the melting pot, irrevocably losing their identity.

The immigrant churches avoid the discussion of cultural and racial differences altogether by simply sticking together. Throughout the week the immigrant community is out in the mainstream society, working, shopping, riding trains and carrying on activities

of day-t-dayliving. However, when they come to worship, it is done in segregation. Their identity is never given an opportunity to be tested for its inter-cultural and inter-racial tolerance within a racially mixed religious or faith community.

Just as the caste system is part of the society from which the immigrants come, racism is an undeniable part of life in this society. There is no wishing it away, and there is no hiding from it. Around the country, there have been several incidents of blatant racial attacks against Indians, such as the “dot buster” incident in September 1987 in Jersey City, New Jersey. People of Indian origin were also victims of job discrimination and glass ceiling.¹⁶ Manning Marable, in his paper

Race, Difference, and the Historical Imagination”, writes, “Although anti-black racism was the dominant paradigm for institutional discrimination, a succession of other ethnic minorities who subsequently emigrated to the United States were also “racialized.” Asian-American, Latino, and American Indian identities are all partially historical and cultural products of exclusion, segregation, the denial of full political rights, and economic exploitation.¹⁷

It is in fighting against the system of racism that is prevalent in the host society and in joining hands with other immigrant communities and with all the other victimized that a new consciousness of themselves can be attained. Neither the “colorblind” approach of naive assimilation into a racist society nor the formation of exclusive “faith” communities would yield the kind of society envisioned in the Bible as the Kingdom of God. What makes the Indian American community unique must be affirmed and embraced and not avoided as a subject of fear and embarrassment. In the awareness and celebration of this uniqueness, identity is developed and, in the identification with other racialized and victimized minority communities, identity is realized as a human right.

Connection Between Racial and Spiritual Identity Development

In the book "*Why Are All Black Kids Sitting Together in Cafeteria?*" Beverly D

Tatum, writes,

To find one's racial or ethnic identity, one must deal with negative stereotypes, resist internalizing negative self-perceptions, and affirm the meaning of ethnicity for oneself. If educators and parents wish to foster these positive psychological outcomes for the children in our, we must hear their voices and affirm their identities at school and at home. And we must interrupt the racism that places them at risk.¹⁸

On another level, Dean Borgman, in his book *When Kumbaya is not Enough*, talks about spiritual identity formation as a task in the adolescent stage,

A person's identity includes cultural and spiritual dimensions. We experience problems and a lack of wholeness when we confuse the personal, sexual, ethnic, class, or vocational aspects of our uniqueness. One may be Asian, adopted, American, bright, ambitious, disadvantaged by poverty and social class, and Christian all at the same time. As a Christian living in a secular society, how does one make whole these aspects of one's cultural and spiritual identities?¹⁹

A theory developed by Derald Sue and David Sue called "Stages of Ethnic Minority Identity" appears to match the experience of Indian-American young people:

- a. The Conformity Stage. Children of elementary school age like to conform to their white peers. They hate wearing their ethnic clothes and putting dots on their foreheads as their parents do. They also do not like their school friends to see their parents in ethnic clothes.
- b. The Dissonance Stage. As they become teenagers, they begin to experience cultural confusion, conflict, or identity crises. Though they tend to rebel against parental and ethnic values, they develop a curious interest in their ethnic identity. In high school, they become vocal and assertive about their identity.
- c. The Resistance and Immersion Stage. During this stage, not only do they begin to immerse themselves in ethnic and cultural lives, but also they react quite emphatically against the white culture and values.
- d. The Introspection Stage. When loyalty to their ethnic group comes into conflict with personal autonomy, they come to realize some of the positive and desirable aspects of the values of the white society. This leads to further introspection and reflection.
- e. The Integrative and Awareness stage. As young adults, their goal becomes to develop a synergistic and integrated bicultural orientation that is more realistic and workable for them.²⁰

This model appears to promote bicultural integration as the end goal. However, for the Christian second-generation youth ministry, this model is limiting in taking into account only two cultures simultaneously: the minority culture and the dominant culture. A model for Christian second-generation integration and identity formation may be found in the scriptural image of the household of God, which allows diverse identities of people to be affirmed, embraced, and celebrated. Korean American Professor Sang Hyun Lee, in an article on the Korean American church, discusses what it means to be Asian American. He states,

If the Asian American church is going to be a true household of God, it must remember all of God's children in its envisioning of the new Asian American ethnicity and culture. Their envisioning of what it means to be Asian American, in other words, must be accompanied by their constructive participation with all other Americans in the ongoing search for what it means to be 'American.'²¹

C. Margaret Hall talks about the importance of religion and religious beliefs in the making of identity by citing Warner and Goode. She states,

Traditional religious beliefs are influenced by secularization and the presence of increasing numbers of more varied religions, with the result that new kinds of religious expressions emerge. Nevertheless, however religions change, they continue to be the most significant sources of values and beliefs for many people, in that both traditional and emergent religious forms and processes provide purposes and directions for everyday behavior (Warner, 1993). Furthermore, religions sacralize certain secular values and beliefs, so that ideals and optimal conditions become cherished goals for human endeavors, as well as signifiers of social status (Goode, 1968).²²

Leaving the problems associated with identities of ethnic and other social groups to their own devices as advocated by certain social thinkers has proved to be disastrous in its consequences. Miroslav Volf suggests that Christian theology ought to be able to provide the necessary basis for multicultural understanding among all cultures. He says,

“Christian theology has significant resources for reflecting on the relations between cultures.”²³ The concept of the household of God provides the scriptural answer to the modern problems of group conflict. Going back to the embedded wisdom of one’s own spiritual tradition would prove to be beneficial as the young people of our study crossing the borders back and forth between the traditional parental culture and mainstream host culture.

End Notes

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⁶ Ibid., p. 21

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²⁰ Grace Sangok Kim, "Asian North American Youth: Ministry of Self-Identity and Pastoral Care," in David Ng (ed.), *People On the Way*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 201.

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²² C. Margaret Hall. *Identity, Religion, and Values: Implications for Practitioners*. (Washington, DC.: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 173.

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Chapter Four

Interviews

In this chapter I seek to clarify the racial and religious identity construction of second-generation Kerala Christian American adolescents before they assume the roles and responsibilities of adulthood. While the factors that may contribute to identity development among young persons are numerous and include questions of region, language, gender, sexual orientation, class, race/ethnicity and religion, this paper limits itself to a discussion of only the last two factors.

There is wide agreement among psychologists and social scientists about the centralsignificance of the teen years in the development of identity and how this period is crucial in the formation of personality, faith, and moral development. They all agree that the convergence of a number of factors – biological changes associated with puberty, the maturation of cognitive abilities, and societal expectations – help bring the urgent process of “identity-consciousness” to full throttle. However, the models of identity formation developed in the West are not appropriate to study the identity, let alone the ethnic identity development, of Indian American youth.

The subjects of our subgroup experience additional challenges in their lives simply by the fact that they belong to a second-generation ethnic group. Ethnic identity development among adolescents is a process that happens uniquely among children born in ethnic minority status. For children born in the dominant culture, ethnic consciousness is not a primary concern since they consider their own ethnicity the norm.¹ Unlike that of children belonging to the dominant culture, minority ethnic children’s ego development is

self-consciously tied to their understanding of their own ethnic identity. In other words, for an ethnic adolescent there is an additional factor s/he needs to resolve, namely his or her ethnic identity, before the task of adolescence is completed. As there is not much work done by way of scholarship on this targeted population, I rely heavily on my findings from interviews conducted with second-generation Kerala Christian Americans in the New York area. I will then compare these findings to findings from research conducted on similar ethnic populations elsewhere to find either consonance or dissonance.

Second-Generation CSI Kerala Christian Americans in New York

I chose to do my field study in two different CSI congregations in New York City because of their large number of young people and active youth groups. Both these congregations are in stark contrast to my CSI congregation in Massachusetts. Unlike my congregation, which meets once a month and conducts services only in English, these congregations meet for worship services every Sunday and conduct their worship services in Malayalam, except on one Sunday a month when it is done in English. I learned that at both congregations young people attend worship services more regularly than adults do, regardless of the language in which the services are celebrated. Over a period of several weeks, I interviewed 15 young persons from these two different CSI congregations, and attended worship services and youth meetings. I was curious to find out the reasons behind the success of these congregations, which are typical of congregations in general in the tri-State area of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, in attracting and retaining the second-generation youngsters. My analysis is based on

participant observation, in-depth interviews with youth, adults, and clergy, and the content of sermons preached on the Sundays I was there.

As I have stated, I was interested to find out what motivates these young people to return to church Sunday after Sunday for worship services and even on weekdays for youth activities, driving long distances from their college dorms or from their homes. Some of these young people have completed four-year colleges and are currently working in area companies in a professional capacity. Born and brought up in the New York area, most of them do not read or write Malayalam, their parents' language. However, they can follow and hold conversations in Malayalam fairly well. Participants in the interviews appeared committed religiously, and they professed their strong faith in God using fundamentalist language.

When I asked the question what motivates them go to the CSI congregation, a preponderance of them answered, "raised that way." Some answered, "a good place to hangout." They also responded, "no other place parents allow us to socialize." Given the kind of faith they profess, to my surprise, no one gave a strictly religious reason for belonging the church. In response to inquiries about their faith formation, most of them answered that they learned about faith through their parents and through annual CSI retreats. Regarding attendance at the local mainstream churches in their neighborhood, the response was that it never occurred to them that it was an option. A few answered that when they were young, their parents had allowed them to go to the Sunday Schools of the local churches. When I challenged by the question that if they could go to a local

church would they do so, most answered that they would not because it would make the parents very unhappy.

They hold the view that for their parents, church is an integral part of their lives and that if children did not go with them to church, parents would not look good in the community. However, the older respondents, ages 19-24, who are in college or working, answered differently: they said that they go to the CSI congregation for a sense of belonging, a place they can return to and be comfortable with others they grew up with. It appeared the respondents between ages 15 and 18 attend church motivated by a sense of obligation to parents, whereas the respondents between ages 19 and 23 are motivated by their own sense of need to be part of an ethnic group now and for future. They hold the view that regardless of the flaws of their church, it is the best place for them to be heard, understood and affirmed. All the respondents emphatically said that it is not for the sermon or for the worship service, which are most often done in Malayalam, that they come to church; rather they come for the youth fellowship and Bible study. They confide in one another about what is going on in their lives and receive strength from one another. When asked why they do not seek their *Achans*², as *Malayalees*³ call their priests, for counseling, all of them responded that *Achans* do not understand them. It appeared as though the youth have formed a church of their own within the larger congregation.

What are some of the explanations for these not-so-enthusiastic responses that somehow do not match the outward appearance of a strong sense of attachment to the ethnic CSI congregation? The more reflective responses by the older respondents seem

to suggest that their interest in church participation is acquired first by going for several years on parental insistence. For parents who formed the congregations upon arrival in this country, the congregation serves the purpose of an institutional framework for formation of community, preservation of their Syrian Christian heritage, and transmission of cultural values. Also, the founding of these congregations helped these immigrants make the transition from the status of sojourners to that of residents. It became a spiritual home. Among all immigrant groups from India, the members of the CSI have the least reason to form a separate entity in the United States because of its Protestant Christian form of worship. Moreover, the CSI is a geographically defined and confined union of Protestant denominations that are widely common in the United States.

This would prompt one to conclude that there is no need for Church of South India congregations in the United States, except for the purpose of retaining the ethnic identity of these Christians from the Southern part of India. For the founders of these Kerala CSI congregations in the United States, the fact that they belong to another distinct group called Syrian Christians of Kerala is another reason to have a separate ethnic congregation of their own. However, one would wonder how, for the second-generation Kerala CSI Americans, do these differences and distinctions carry any weight as far as their religious lives in this country are concerned? For the younger respondents they matter little, whereas for the older respondents they formed the basis for ethnic cohesion and unity. And for parents, how much their values, ways of life and traditions will be transmitted to the next generation largely depends on the institution of the church and how strictly they enforce religious adherence in the young. Religion plays a central

role in mitigating the disruptions and strains caused by migration. This is especially true in the United States. Americans view religion as the most acceptable and nonthreatening basis for community formation and expression.⁴ Raymond B. Williams states, "Religion helps shape both minority identity and the negotiations with majority community regarding status, identity, and opportunity."⁵

While motivation for ethnic church involvement is partly due to the primordial attachment to shared ancestry, culture and aspirations, with respect to the parents of our subgroup, it is largely due to the developmental aspect of reacting to the new environment where they are to settle. Unlike the European immigrants of the past, who were able more easily to blend in with the rest upon their arrival, the new immigrants, though they share the same religious past as the host culture, are separated from the dominant society by the ascriptive and involuntary nature of their race, color and phenotypic features. Even without the overt signals and signs that distinguish them from the host culture, such as dress, language, and life style, they are a visible community. Having lost confidence in being able to fully assimilate into the host community due to these external markers, the immigrant community is driven to attach itself to the basic core values of their culture mediated through religion. In a field study Prema Kurian observes,

Many of the Indian immigrants I have spoken to mentioned that they had become more religious after coming to this country, where for the first time they had to think about the meaning of their religion and religious identity, something they could take for granted in India.⁶

Chong notes a similar phenomenon in her field study on Korean Americans:

...one of the most significant ways in which the second-generation members within the church articulate their ethnic identity is through the appropriation of certain elements of “practiced culture,” that is, values and standards of traditional Korean morality. These values, ubiquitously invoked in their discourse about their Korean identity, consist of a set of core traditional Korean Confucian values – most significantly, filial piety, respect for parents, family-centeredness, and work ethic.⁷

The responses of all my interviewees, regardless of their ages, demonstrated respect for their parents and elders in the community, which means all the parents and grandparents. Youth call all adults except their own parents ‘uncles’ and ‘auntees’, and the grandparents are called either *appacha* (grandpa) and *ammachi* (grandma). In most homes, children continue to stay with parents even after college and beginning to earn a living on their own. Children also see that their parents bring their grandparents from India to live with them in the United States rather than leaving them in India alone, a clear indication of family values practiced as preached from the pulpit.

Some of my respondents, especially the girls, told me how strict parents are with them about hanging out with peers from school, especially if the peers are boys. They also complained that parents do not allow them to go to parties, movies or games with their friends. While they acknowledge that parents enforce these restrictions for their own safety, they think that their parents are overprotective of them. They also think that parents are more cautious with their daughters because girls are expected to be chaste and pure so that the tradition will go on intact. Maira states, “In the second generation, young women are viewed as embodying ethnic boundaries and their social and sexual behavior is monitored as an index of ethnic authenticity.”⁸ At family parties or community get-togethers, men, women and youth are often seen separately. This is how they sit in the

church for worship and community meetings, a practice continued from Kerala. Young girls, following the adult women, wear a head-scarf while they are in the church, another Christian practice from Kerala.

Some of the young people's responses to faith questions showed deep commitment to Christianity, and this voiced in Christian fundamentalist terms. When pushed further as to what their Christian commitment means in their daily lives, some responded that it meant being a good person, obeying parents, respecting elders, going to church regularly and having a strong work ethic. Faith also means to them helping others, the poor and homeless, especially in this country. Given the regularity of their church attendance, I was puzzled by their common response that faith was imparted to them by parents rather than by the priests in the church. This may have been partly due to *Achen's* preaching in Malayalam; even when they preach in English, it still does not speak to the youth, because the illustrations used in sermons are far from the reality they experience in their everyday lives. Most of the young people wished they had *Achens* who could really communicate with them. The sermon preached on one day I attended worship had to do with the moral depravity, decay and degradation in this country with regard to sexual promiscuity and homosexuality, and with how people must guard against the liberal sexual morality in the West through strong faith in Jesus Christ. Whether or not the church is all that it can be, it is seen as the symbol of Kerala Christian morality. This "immigrant Puritanism" according to Williams is "a predictable reaction to the ethical and behavioral disorientation that affects immigrants."⁹ He goes on to say, "Nevertheless, the demonstrated need for most immigrants to give expression to their experience in

religious terms and to attempt to shape their future in religious communities does provide a recognizable Puritan cast to immigrant religions that is revitalized by the arrival of new immigrants.”¹⁰ The church in the immigrant community gives a stamp of approval to their values and culture and provides legitimacy for their ethnicity.

End Notes

¹ Beverly Daniel Tatum, “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” (New York, N.Y: BasicBooks, 1997), p.93.

² *Achan* is a Malayalam word for priest or pastor. A priest is never called by his/her name by Malayalees.

³ *Malayalee* is the person who speaks the language *Malayalam*, the regional language of Kerala State, India. A person from Kerala is either called Keralite or *Malayalee*.

⁴ Stephen Warner, Toward a new paradigm for the sociological study of religion in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98, 1058.

⁵ Raymond B. Williams, *Christian Pluralism in the United States* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), p.183.

⁶ Prema Kurian, “Gendered ethnicity: Creating a Hindu Indian identity in the United States,” *The American Behavioral Scientist* (Thousand Oaks) (Jan. 1999): p.648.

⁷ Kelly H. Chong, “What it means to be Christian: The role of religion in the construction of ethnic identity and boundary among second-generation Korean Americans,” *Sociology of Religion*, (Washington) (Fall, 1998): p.259.

⁸ Sunaina Marr Maira, *Chaste Identities, Ethnic Yearnings: Second-Generation Indian Americans In New York City*, Dissertation, Graduate School of Education of Harvard University, 1998: vi.

⁹ Williams, 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183

Chapter Five

Identity Formation: A Theological Exploration

The experiences of young people in our study are different from those of their parents' generation. In the previous chapter we have observed how their experiences shape and form the contours of their identity in a distinct way. As the purpose of this study is to develop ways to do youth ministry, an understanding of their identity from a theological perspective is also necessary. In this chapter, I argue that those who are engaged in ministering to the ethnic youth not only need to understand and affirm their identity but also need to make the formation of their identity itself a task of youth ministry.

Reaching an understanding of the intrinsic relation between the environment in which our young people live, work, and socialize and their identity is central to this study. The milieu they live in is characterized by the blatancy of its contradictions, ambiguity of its boundaries, and its lack of role models. How the nature of their context relates to the way they understand themselves and make meaning of their world is a question of crucial theological importance.

Immigrant and theological significance of context

For the young people who are the subject of this study, the lives they lead, the context in which they live, and the challenges they encounter are all different from those of their parents' generation and those of their mainstream counterparts. Traditional and "normative" theologies fall short of addressing the particular concerns of second-

generation CSI Kerala American young people. This calls for a contextual theology that takes into account the particularity of their experience and affirms their identity. This is the theological parallel to the multicultural pattern of adaptation to the American society. Though it appears very post-modern in its manifestation, it is as old as the biblical incarnational theology. However, this theological affirmation of particular identities draws a sharp distinction from the assimilation pattern of earlier Asian migrations as observed by Fumitaka Matsuoka:

At the same time, many viewed churches as a major route and catalyst towards assimilation, which in reality meant accommodation to the values of the dominant European American social order. Early Asian immigrants found membership in Christian churches, as a way to be quickly identified as American and avoid being continually labeled “alien.” Some immigrants assumed that one quick, acceptable way to assimilate was to convert to Christianity, the principal faith and major cultural force of the land.¹

Early immigrants passively followed the pattern practiced during colonial times by identifying with the white culture, values, and ethos. To be socialized into the “right” culture assured them social mobility. M. Shawn Copeland describes what was meant by the “right” culture thus: “....in America, to be cultured was to appropriate and to imitate the style and content of European civilization; in fact, to be American meant to imitate the style and content of European civilization.”² Churches played a pivotal role in the socialization of early immigrants to the United States and helped maintain the cultural hegemony of dominant culture. For mainline churches, newly arrived immigrants from the previously colonized nations became the new mission fields. Protestant home mission boards saw Asian immigrants as objects of missionary zeal, people to be “converted” and immigrants to be assimilated into one America.³

In recent years, the mainline churches have moved away from actively playing the role of socializing agent for the republic whose slogan was *e pluribus unum* ("from many, one"). Yet, every now and then, especially during times of national crisis, the homogenizing tendencies of earlier times can be heard in the rhetoric of ultra-nationalistic and extreme Christian fundamentalist circles. However, increasingly assertive and politically astute newer arrivals to the United States have changed the discussion about the pattern of adaptation from passive assimilation to an assertive integration which finds its expression in a multicultural society. Peter Phan sees this development in the light of post-modernity.

Even though ethnic and national consciousness is not of recent vintage, nevertheless, in our "post-modern" age, these two contexts of religious experience have undergone a significant change, and hence the ways in which they shape religious experience have presumably altered as well. Thus, for instance, however "post-modernity" is defined, it is clear that in our times the ideal of ethnic homogeneity is being vociferously rejected, at least in the United States, and as a result, instead of the "melting pot" model, that of the "salad bowl" is being proposed for our multi-ethnic and multi-racial culture.⁴

In addition to the newer immigrants, the second-generation immigrants are also a factor in influencing the pattern of adaptation from the previous assimilative monocultural society to the present integrative multicultural society. The subgroup of our study is clearly a distinct group, who sees reality differently from the ways of their parents or that of their counterparts in the mainstream society. As a group their influence in defining their ethnic group and the mainstream society will continue to grow in the years to come. In order to do ministry among this group, a theological understanding that makes sense of their experiences must be achieved.

A Theology That Matters

A theology that matters is a theology that is contextual and incarnational. The gospel says that God, who loves the world very much, entered the world at a particular place and time in history for its redemption, and asked his disciples to preach this good news of redemption to people where ever they live, even to the ends of the world. To do so in human history, the universal God took the form of a human in Jesus and lived among the people of Israel. At any point in history and place, the world is manifested in its culture. As Jesus enters the culture, his intention is not to destroy it but to fulfill its potential by transforming it. Through the preaching of the gospel, this universal God continues to enter our cultures, lives among its inhabitants, urging them to make meaning of their experiences and lives, and transforming them into a new creation with a new identity.

As second-generation young people struggle to find their own voice and identity, the choices are many. Anna Chacko-George, a youth minister in England, in her essay "Iconoclasm," sees that there are two choices for young people. One is the path of "cultural schizophrenia," which she describes as the status quo of growing up by living in two different mindsets and ethical frameworks. And the other is the path of "cultural amnesia" which is an all out assimilation into the Western culture, forgetting one's own cultural heritage and story. As both these options fall short of realizing an actual identity that is true to their concept of self, which is born out of struggle, she suggests a third way, a creative identity which is neither the old one nor the one promoted by the dominant

culture. It is a God-centered identity.⁵ Ellen T. Charry observes from a mainstream Christian perspective on the current youth culture:

There is a gathering consensus that the young in our society are adrift and in danger. Their self-concept is predominantly shaped by entertainment, and they are likely to turn to one another, rather than to adults for help. Yet, while adults wring their hands, the market is giving children a self-concept and role models that are increasingly ignoble. In addition, the extreme individualism of the culture turns the young away from adults and organized community life. Finally, suspicion of the past and of institutions alienates the young from traditional sources of wisdom and safety. Materialism, individualism, and the loss of the past may keep the economy booming, but the combination is proving to be spiritually and physically debilitating.⁶

With the failure of past models to provide the young needed direction and sufficient guidance, young people, whether from the dominant or the ethnic culture, are turning to a market-shaped identity for themselves. How can Christian youth ministry be effective in turning the tide, and provide young people with an alternative, a God-centered identity? How does Christ enter their culture and make meaning for their situations and experiences? I suggest that we briefly look at four contextual factors of their social location with accompanying theological reflection and exploration of opportunities for Christian ministry.

Homelessness

Unlike the first-generation, who lives in isolated enclaves, the second-generation young people of our study live on the border between the inherited culture of their parents and the encountered culture of the mainstream society. They sense apprehension as well as freedom in making the choice of where they may eventually call "home." Their apprehension is due to making a commitment, while the freedom comes from a lack of understanding about their identity. The isolated communities or enclaves parents created

offer security in a foreign land and a feeling of accomplishment for the first-generation. Most often these communities were created to protect their young, to continue the ways of the old country, and to preserve their faith along with an ancient culture. However, as time passes and as they socialize more and more in the mainstream society through schools, young people feel that they have grown out of the usefulness of these enclaves parents created for their protection. Moreover, they do not feel the burden as their parents do in preserving the old culture. Also, unlike parents, for young people the ethnic church is not the only place for community. As far as they are concerned, their parents' agenda and issues have very little to do with the realities of the present. And as they grow, their participation in the parents' culture becomes superficial and symbolic, born out of necessity while growing up at home and out of obligation to the parents.

In contrast, young people are more at ease with the mainstream society. They are multi-lingual and multi-cultural. They are future-oriented. The contrasting cultures they grow up in are highly competitive in demanding of them their full participation. Growing up in the parents' culture at home and in church, on the one hand, and in the peer and dominant culture at school and outside, on the other, gives them both versatility in cultural understanding and the ability to adapt to conflicting environments. In as much as they are allowed to participate in both worlds while growing up, they develop a sense of confidence and the ability to be dual citizens in both places.

Nevertheless, they are neither there nor here, and their total acceptability in either place is anything but guaranteed. They are in between, out of place, and are "homeless." Theirs is a confidence that has not been tested for its durability as they themselves are

quite young. Their experience of growing up in different cultural spheres is the crucial factor in the formation of their identity. The identity when formed will be different both from that of their parents and from that of the dominant culture. It will form a hybrid identity, more complex than the ones they were exposed to growing up. Consequently, they lack authenticity in either culture. While they could be in both places, their full participation in either is severely constrained. In this sense they are “homeless” or aliens who live in between cultures. On the one hand, they are vulnerable and confused, and on the other, the experience they go through is a dynamic, relational, and a multi-layered process. They are hybrid and hyphenated Indian-Americans in search of their identity.

Abrahamaic Pilgrimage & Theology of ‘Exile’

Asian American theologian Sang Hyun Lee views the Asian American experience of immigration to the United States in the light of the scriptural account of Abraham’s pilgrimage to the promised land.⁷ The first-generation Asian American journey into the United States and subsequent experience of their rejection and life in the margins have all been given meaning in light of the story of Abraham, the Biblical patriarch. God called Abraham out of a land that was familiar to him to go to a land that would be shown to him at some point in the future. His obedience to God to go on a pilgrimage fraught with risks and perils earned him the title, “the father of the faithful.” Lee argues that Abraham’s experience in the scriptures parallels the sense of shame and dehumanization Asian Americans experienced at the hands of the dominant society when they came to the United States. Their journey to the United States and their continued marginality here differ from that of the earlier European immigrants. Again, unlike the European

immigrants for whom the assimilation pattern of American adaptation worked well, Asian immigrants experienced a marginality that kept them from assimilating into the dominant culture and drove them to self-confinement in isolated places.

The Abrahamaic experience, however, can be more powerfully invoked to make sense of the second-generation young people's life at the borders and their sense of homelessness. Abraham's pilgrimage is characterized by his leaving the past, negotiating with the present and hopeful embrace of the future. A careful study of the Hebrew scriptures would reveal that Abraham was clearly in charge of his pilgrimage and not a passive victim of marginality. At every turn in his pilgrimage, he negotiated with the peoples, kings, and cultures on his own terms. He became a friend of the king of Sodom, also known as Mechizadek, the priest of the God Most High. While the parents' generation identifies with a vulnerable and marginalized image of Abraham, the second-generation young people may want to identify more with the successful and powerful image of Abraham. In both images of Abraham, one would see that he maintained a God-centered spirituality. Whether at the zenith of his success or at the nadir of his defeat, he experienced the presence of God. The image of a successful or vulnerable Abraham standing before the altar of God built in the liminal space provides the second-generation young people of our study the needed spiritual resources as they negotiate their way through the maze of the mainstream culture. In racialized society, marginality of second-generation Asian Americans may be a permanent state of affairs. Sang Hyun Lee notes,

"Asian Americans are a diverse people who left home, either in their generation or from an earlier generation. We have been going through a wilderness of liminal in-betweeness, and have been in need of reincorporation into structure.

We need to come home. But the dominant group in America resists our arrival and keeps us at the edges of this society.”⁸

However, the young people are on a pilgrimage to a multicultural society in which no one group would suffer the indignities of marginality. The experience of Abraham’s pilgrimage toward a promised goal in the future provides a sense of hope to transcend the persistent reality of marginality.

Opportunity for Ministry

The ethnic church still operates using the earlier understanding of a vulnerable and marginalized pilgrim on a journey. Even after the demography shifts in favor of second-generation young people, the ethnic church is controlled by the parents’ generation and the clerics from India. By asking “How can a local church be authentically local if it is not incarnated, enfleshed, in the cultural milieu of its own people?”, Christopher Duraisingh answers,

Such a rootedness involves all dimensions of the church’s life: liturgy, spirituality, fellowship, proclamation, theology, nurture, service. It includes an inculturation of the styles of church governance and architecture. How far from this our churches are today! Too often their life and liturgy reveal the culture of another place, often the birthplace of the denomination; or the culture of another time, eg. the period of the Reformation.⁹

To serve effectively among the young people, the church must come up with new symbols and new ways of thinking. Preaching, Bible study, music, and worship all must reflect the local experiences of the young people to be able to communicate with them, to empower them as well as to help them develop their identity.

Model Minority Expectation

The young people in this study are expected to perform well in school and, later on, as professionals. Within this community, a college degree is the minimum expectation. Many parents push children to go for professional programs like that of the seven-year intensive medical school right after high school. Parents see young people as extensions of themselves, and as a continuation of fulfilling their dreams in coming to the United States. In many ways, despite all the odds of beginning a career in a foreign country, parents themselves have been able to do well professionally and financially. This has been true especially of those who arrived at the beginning of relaxed immigration in the mid-sixties. As doctors, nurses, engineers and professors, these immigrants entered the workforce in the early seventies. Though the arrivals since then were not professionally as qualified as the earlier arrivals had been, they worked harder, sometimes holding more than one job, and together the Asian minority has come to the top level of household income for all Americans. And, according to recent statistics, the Asian Indians top the income levels of all minority groupings.¹⁰ In a similar way, they did well educationally. In the early years of immigration, technology and science-oriented educational institutions in the United States attracted foreign students from India for graduate studies, and after their studies many of them have stayed and worked for multinational corporations. Today, their children, second-generation Indian American students, are admitted in large numbers, disproportionate to their national census, in all categories of American educational institutions.¹¹ Being in a community of affluence and

educational achievement brings enormous pressure on all members, especially the young people, to do well and to keep up the pace.

However, this success of Asian Americans has also triggered a nativististic tendency to become a bounded or closed community. Mainstream society's stereotyping of Asian Americans as a "model minority" has had a cynical purpose and agenda. It is used to discredit other minorities who are not "making it in America" and in need of a social safety-net, arguing that if Asian Americans can succeed, so can Blacks and Hispanics. This creates a wedge not only between Asian Americans and other minorities but also among Asian Americans themselves. Moreover, policymakers and government planners hold this view of a model minority to divert funds and other resources from those Asian Americans who do need the government safety net and instead to allocated them to other minorities.¹²

Regardless of the dominant society's view of Asian Americans and governmental social policies, the expectations of the Indian American community for the second generation continues to drive the young people to excel both academically and professionally. This is quite evident among the young people of our study. Societal and parental expectations, coupled with their own need for survival in a tough competitive market drive them to leave behind their adolescent years without having resolved the issues related to adolescence. With parents working more hours to keep up with the economic pressures, and no adult role models from their own community to consult with, young people often find their own friends to help them with choices. In many ways, as in the case of their parents when they first came to the United States, our young people are

pioneers and trailblazers, charting their own course in the wilderness of their parents' diaspora.

Do the young people find their inherited faith community a source of help and guidance with regard to vocation? According to the young people, their faith community is burdened with the agenda of the adults, priests and bishops. Certainly, the formation of their spiritual identity is influenced by their understanding of the community's expectation of them and by the lack of meaningful support they receive from that community.

Minority Identity and Theology of Success

Motivated to please their parents and lured by lucrative professions, second-generation young people study hard during their high school and college years with a career in mind. Parents tell their children that only if they study hard, will they as a minority person be able to make it in this country. Given that young people are expected to carry on the tradition and save the name of their families and communities by doing well economically and professionally, parents will be extremely disappointed and hurt if young people entertain any contrary thoughts or ideas of vocation less lucrative or prestigiously professional. Very little thought or regard is given to the young person's own gifts, talents, interests or dreams.

This community expectation to do well academically and professionally grew out of the perceived need for survival in a hostile environment as well as creating an identity based on success. However, what is perceived by the parents' generation, who came to the United States solely for economic well-being, and what is perceived by the second

generation, who see the need for survival not just for themselves but also for a wider community, are very different. Value placed on success differs between generations.

Early followers of Jesus and the society surrounding Jesus expected of him something totally different from what he offered. Politically, they expected him to be their messiah who would drive out the Romans and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. Disciples wanted him to be a king with power and authority. The masses wanted him to be a miracle worker. However, he chose a different path and vocation. The vision that led him was larger, the need he perceived for the society was different, and the community he envisioned was beyond the narrow borders of Israel.

A closed community, solely interested in self-preservation and afraid to venture outside its self-imposed walls, cannot develop a vision larger than maintaining its narrow parochial concerns. However, to assume that young people, who grew up in the space between the parents' ethnic community and the peer mainstream community, do not have their own vision for the future, is to ignore the historical and contextual elements that have molded their identity. The continued marginality they experience in their contextual setting, instead of turning them inward as in the case of the parents' generation, causes these young people to dare to take on vocations that seek to promote the welfare of all concerned. The authors of *Common Fire* analyze this experience thus: "Vulnerability-based marginality can numb the will and fuel despair, it can also nourish compassionate action and fire an imagination of possibility."¹³ The marginality that produces this kind of response is a gift:

Even when it carries a price, marginality can also bear certain gifts: greater self-knowledge, greater awareness of others, and a kind of comfort with life at the

edge. The central gift of marginality, however, is its power to promote both empathy with the other and a critical perspective on one's own tribe.¹⁴

The life and mission of Jesus, who was born and brought up in the margins and chose to stay in the margins till his death on the cross, provide the basis for a Christian's life and choice of vocation. Contrary to the expectations of contemporary society and his own followers, he chose the path of a suffering servant for the benefit of all. He set his eyes on a mission that exacted from him the ultimate price, his own life. Frederick Buechner defines this view of vocation as "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹⁵

Opportunity for Ministry

What are some of the ways the ethnic congregations can guide the young people with respect to their future and vocation? How do ethnic congregations help young people develop a Christian perspective on success? The dependence on spiritual leadership from India continues to hamper the effectiveness of ethnic church ministry among young people. However, although this may be the case at the present, the ethnic church can quickly become young people oriented by encouraging and recruiting talented and gifted young people from its own midst to go for theological training for future leadership in the church. They could also serve as role models for future generations of young people in the church. For this to happen, the ethnic church must begin to shift focus from serving primarily first-generation immigrants to also include also serving the second-generation young people in areas they need to be served.

Profession of Faith versus Practice

The young people in our study are extremely concerned about the wide gap between the preaching and practice of faith. They say that they go to their ethnic churches, not for spiritual uplift, but rather for its social and cultural value. They learn about faith more at annual retreats and other youth gatherings, where the topics discussed and issues raised are closer to their own reality. What goes on in their inherited church is so far removed from their everyday lives that they do not see any meaning in their participation, whereas for adults the involvement and worship in the church brings back memories of a religiously meaningful past from Kerala, in the hope that at least some of it will pass on to the younger generation.

What little they receive from the pulpit is often characterized by its morally righteous tones. They hear about the negative influences of the mainstream society and receive the practical advice to be vigilant against them. Young people are disturbed by this “us” against “them” approach to faith. Instead, they like to hear how they can be involved in the society in which they find themselves and become agents for change. They are also concerned about the struggle among adults for leadership positions, occasionally manifested in loud bursts of open and ugly confrontation with one another, even to the point of congregations breaking up for good. Congregational life is removed from the faith that it is preaching.

Another aspect that is absent both in rhetoric and practice is racial understanding and celebration of racial and cultural diversity. The inherent racism forming the basis of their inherited faith and tradition – Syrian Christian - is kept as a community secret

which everybody acknowledges, but no one dares to challenge. For young people, who are exposed to manifestations of racism in the mainstream society, it is difficult to fathom their own “Christian” community’s deplorable racism. How do these contradictions and conflicts of their inherited faith community mold the ongoing process of their identity formation? As identity is formed not in a vacuum or in a static way, contextual factors will continue to play a role in this evolutionary process.

Theology of Household of God

In the New Testament the early believers were called as the members of the household of God. In his letter to the Ephesian Christians, Apostle Paul writes,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.¹⁶

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the dividing wall between the Jews and gentiles was broken down and the enmity between them ceased to exist. The particularities, differences, and identities of people remain while the hostilities, exclusions, and domination stop within the household of God. Commenting on I Corinthians 12:13, which reads, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -Jews, Greeks, slaves or free- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” Miroslav Volf writes,

The resurrected Christ, in whom Jews and Greeks are united through baptism, is not a spiritual refuge from pluralizing corporeality, a pure spiritual space into which only the undifferentiated sameness of a universal human essence is admitted. Rather, baptism into Christ creates a people as the differentiated body of Christ. Bodily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed.¹⁷

Identities are important and preserved in the household of God. They are non-alienating. What is central to this concept is that believers in their particularity come together in non-alienating new humanity. Understanding the ethnic church in the light of this concept fits theologically well for the people on a pilgrimage.

Do the CSI congregations of diaspora serve as a household of God to the young people? In the early days when the number of immigrants was relatively small, the Indian worshipping communities showed resemblances to the household of God concept of the early church as well as to Abraham's temporary altars. However, today, the ethnic Indian church functions more in the manner of temples with walls built by Ezra and Nehemiah during the period of Israel's exile. As the number of Christian immigrants has increased, denominationalism, regionalism, and factionalism have replaced the earlier characteristics of inclusion and ecumenism of the Indian congregations. Today, not only can the ethnic Indian churches claim to be a community of believers in the margins, but they have become communities that are engaged in increasing marginalization within its own four walls. Scripture says that during Abraham's pilgrimage, he not only built altars and worshipped God but also negotiated with the local peoples and cultures and formed communities. Abraham's example of engagement with the other in the Old Testament and Paul's vision of household of God remain a challenge for Indian ethnic congregations.

Regardless of its current diminished spiritual status as a household of God for the Indian Christian immigrants, the church holds out promising signs for transformation. The second-generation young people continue to come and participate in the activities of

church. For the young people, who themselves feel alienated and marginalized within the power structure of the church community, the church provides a space for them to be together and to be empowered.

Though the ethnic church can play a far more powerful role in their lives, it currently serves the congregants in a limited way as a place of refuge and a place where they can invoke the past. In this sense for the Church of South India community in New York City, their congregations play a crucial role. Members come from great distances to attend worship in their own language with their own people and to be together as a community. The ethnicity that caused their rejection in the mainstream society becomes the rallying point for their being together as a church. In their coming together to worship God as an ethnic community, the place becomes central to their relationship with God. Yet, they are shortchanged.

Notwithstanding the potential values of an ethnic church to the people, to be an authentic household of God the ethnic churches have a quite a ways to go. A closer examination of the ethnic churches reveals many hidden fault lines. Power in the church is usually concentrated among a few financially well-off middle-aged men. Young people and women are only minimally allowed to share in the power. There is marginalization even within the walls of the ethnic church.

Young people, idealistic and innocent in their faith commitment, are put off by the power play and politics practiced by adult men and the passive role adult women play in their ethnic congregation. Also, young people, who have had contacts with other minorities at school and at work and are interested in expanding their social circle, are

discouraged by the exclusivistic nature of their ethnic church. They see a divide between what their faith stands for and what is practiced within their faith community. Young people are looking for a community where their identity and ethnicity can be affirmed and celebrated and where they will be challenged to take a leap of faith in forming community with 'the other.'

Life at the borders or on the margin is temporal in nature. Unlike Abraham who erected altars and engaged and negotiated with the local cultures, the CSI community sees itself to be an entrenched community that uses the church as a fortress to separate 'the other' from their midst and a hideout to keep it from outside influences. Also, unlike in the household of God concept of the early church, there is marginalization, domination, and hierarchy within the ethnic church. The ethnic church operates itself on the assumption of a permanent status. On this point, Lee writes,

Another way to look at the particularity of the Asian American ethnicity is to point to its fundamentally dynamic and open character. Asian American identity and ethnicity is not an eternally fixed reality; it is in the making. And the making of this something new requires the creative energies inherent in the in-between, liminal condition of Asian Americans. One of the essential tasks of the Asian American church would be to free up the creativity of the in-between people affirming them for what we are. The household of God, in other words, has to be a place where Asian Americans can dream dreams.¹⁸

The concept of a household of God as opposed to a temple of God may be a better fit for the ethnic church that operates in the margins. However, for an ethnic church to become a household of God, it must first learn to share power within itself; it must open itself to others who struggle for their dignity and identity, and must not seek permanence to the point of losing its liminal nature and creative focus. If an ethnic church in the margin is understood in the light of the household of God concept of the New Testament,

it could become the locus for growth for the socially dislocated young people. In this supportive community young people would experience their religious and racial identities as affirmed.

Opportunity for Ministry

By definition, the young people are at that time of their life when they are poised to take off on a pilgrimage of their own. It is important for them to have a home base to come back to whenever they need to from wherever they are in their journey. By providing a home base for them to come back time and again to gather resources and to be empowered, a home parish modeled after the household of God vision would be a way to minister to the young people. A congregation modeled after the mother church would only serve in bringing back the memories of the past. It will not help our young people prepare themselves for the future or provide them with an identity strong enough to aid them in negotiating with the mainstream culture. Again, this calls for the development of local leadership, especially from the young people.

Identity and Facing the Black and White Racial Divide

Another important environmental factor that shapes the formation of identity is the racial consciousness of the mainstream society. Until recently, the census questionnaire had only three categories, white, black and other. This was the case when I first came to the United States, and I always categorized myself as “the other,” meaning that I was neither white nor black. My race was defined in terms of black and white. However, the latest census form has nineteen categories for race, mine included. Yet the American landscape is still viewed along the black and white divide, with Asian

Americans lost in it. All the non-whites are lumped together as “colored,” as if all the non-white folks share some common identity. If at all there is such a identity, it is again a negative one, and that is that they are not white. The ethnic young people of our study growing up in this type of environment, where they have to identify with a “catch-all” category for identification of their race, are at a clear disadvantage at the start.

As far as their participation with either race, black or white, is concerned, there is much confusion. Their features and color are different, with the result that they will not be able to participate fully with either race. It is clear from my conversations with young people that their parents’ generation prefer their children to associate with whites, as this would place them on a higher rung in the social “ladder” of upward mobility. The young people, however, find a certain solidarity with blacks, as they themselves have experiences in the dominant society similar to those of their black counterparts. There is considerable tension among Indian parents with respect to their children’s participation with African American youth and their identification with their issues.¹⁹ Regarding this issue, Sunaina Maira quotes Amrijit Singh’s observation in her dissertation on second-generation Indian Americans:

Unlike their parents, they have African American friends and have developed a better understanding of how racism and poverty operate in American society. Although their responses may not fit a sophisticated intellectual view of race and ethnicity, these young Asians appear to know at some level that the alienation they feel at work or school is experienced even more intensely by their black peers. They are also often in tune with rap and reggae; maybe the deep sense of “alienation” expressed in contemporary black music resonates with their own sense of rebellion against their parents’ double standards: an insistence on seeing African Americans harshly through the prism of caste even as they cloak themselves in the highest ideals of fairness and equal opportunity.²⁰

The parents' generation, who grew up in the privileged class and caste structure in India, find it only natural to identify with powerful and privileged whites in the United States. Though their acceptance into the white institutional system was anything but welcoming, they resisted associating with blacks as this would have been equivalent to associating with the low castes, whom they had oppressed in India. Regardless of the violation of their rights in the dominant society, the first generation resisted seeking solidarity with other minority groups and fighting for equality and justice. The first generation has been too ashamed to admit that they do not share equal status in the dominant society, and they are too proud to identify themselves as victims. They opt to suffer silently.

However, second-generation young people, whose peers include African Americans and whose studies in school covered the history of slavery and the civil rights movement, are more aware of the plights of black people in the society. They see that their own experience has similarities with that of their black counterparts. Unlike the parents' generation, they do not suffer the indignities silently. In this, they reach out to their black friends to join hands with them to fight for equality. They see that their parents have been too timid to stand up for their rights and/or too hypocritical with respect to racism. There is substantial attitudinal difference between the first- and second-generation Indian Americans about racism in the United States. Whether or not our young people experience rebellion towards their parents, there is no doubt that they find a camaraderie among their African American counterparts.

Theology of Identification

We have seen in the section dealing with the American racial divide, how the first-generation young people find it difficult to identify their marginality with that of the black community in the United States. It is ironic to note that what made the Asian immigration possible in the first place was the result of the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1965, which was fought for by the black civil rights movement in the sixties. The Indian immigrants, born after colonial rule ended in India, were also the beneficiaries of a free and independent India. Thus, never having had to fight for their independence in India or for the Civil Rights Act that led to their arrival in the United States, first generation Indian Americans are mostly self-focused and self-centered. Identification is possible only when a self-centered identity is given up as the ultimate goal. The tendency for isolation among first-generation immigrants can also find its roots in fear and mistrust of 'the other.' What we see in the scriptural account of Ezra and Nehemiah to get rid of all foreign peoples and send away all foreign wives²¹ from among the people of Judah was the result of a self-centered identity and mistrust of the other. However, as we have seen earlier, second-generation Indian Americans are more politically astute and do not feel beholden to the dominant white society.

The scriptural account of Moses growing up in Pharaoh's palace and his eventual identification with the oppressed provides a model for coalition building for the second-generation young people. Unlike their parents' generation, second generation young people can be intentional in their decision to participate with the least and needy. They can rise above the narrow confines of their racial and tribal lines and identify with other

minorities in building coalitions and partnerships for justice and equality. The authors of *Common Fire* write,

Forming a sense of one's own particularity, one's own tribe, is an essential human activity. But the kind of citizens we need in the complex social and ecological realities of the twenty-first century are the kind that Cornel West describes in his book, *Race Matters*. West writes of "race-transcending prophets," people who never lose contact with their own particularity, yet refuse to be confined to it. They are able to engage with people of other tribes as full human beings, enlarging rather than relinquishing their networks of belonging. Having practiced compassion across tribal boundaries, sometimes nourished by the circumstances of marginality, they have come to a deeply held conviction that everyone counts.²²

Jesus provides the ultimate example of letting go of privilege and status by taking the form of a human in solidarity with the plight of the poor, sick, alienated and wretched of the earth. Miroslav Volf summarizes Jurgen Moltmann's thoughts on the significance of the cross:

The sufferings of Christ on the cross are not just his sufferings; they are 'the sufferings of the poor and weak, which Jesus shares in his own body and in his own soul, in solidarity with them.' (Moltmann 1992, 130). And since God was in Christ, "through his passion Christ brings into the passion history of this world the eternal fellowship of God and divine justice and righteousness that creates life" (131). On the cross, Christ both "identifies God with the victims of violence" and identifies "the victims with God," so that they are put under God's protection and with him are given the rights of which they have been deprived.(131)²³

Opportunity for Ministry

If the ethnic church is willing to wake up from its self imposed hibernation, it can enter into a wide array of ministries with unlimited possibilities. Currently, the ethnic church focuses its attention on structural building and self-maintenance. Too engrossed in its own affairs, the ethnic church is passing up opportunities to be involved in society and to be a witness. While the parents' generation may be aware of the social ills and problems,

young people are concerned about them and are willing to get involved. This may be a occasion for the ethnic church to work with young people and to give them leadership and moral support. The Indian Christian group may find that they could build coalitions with similar groups on common issues of interest and concern. Whereas in other areas, the Indian ethnic church may want to seek support in capacity building from groups who have a long history of consciousness raising work. Young people are especially attracted to this type of community involvement and participation.

Conclusion

I have outlined a few factors among so many that may describe the environment, in which young people of today live, study, work, and socialize. All these contribute and interact in a dynamic way towards the formation of their identity, an identity they may find drastically different from that of their parents' generation. Growing up protected from many environmental factors crucial to their development, young people are often denied valuable experiences and discoveries that could enhance their racial and spiritual identity. However, I submit that growing up exposed to the cultural context with proper guidance from adult mentors in a supportive faith community based on a theology that is affirming, meaningful and transformative would help them develop their own identity. In an attempt to formulate a theology that would provide meaning to the contexts in which the young people live, study, work, and socialize, I identified four specific contexts. They are: homelessness, expectation and vocation, profession of faith verses practice, and racism within community. Each of these contexts within which the young people of our study grow up poses tremendous problems to overcome and great possibilities for youth

ministry within ethnic and mainstream churches. Ethnic church by definition and by its location is not in a position to minister to the young people. As the ethnic church is primarily concerned about the spiritual well-being of the first-generation, it does not have the time, resources, or the sociological understanding to create and sustain a youth ministry to be of any value. Youth ministries the individual congregations are currently engaged in do not meet the social, intellectual or spiritual needs of young people. Their primary goal is to see that the CSI tradition from Kerala would continue through the next generation. This is a disservice to young people and to the future of the CSI tradition in the United States.

The young people of the CSI congregations need to be empowered through youth ministry. They show great promise despite the narrow and self-centered goals of their community. The church must identify the young people who show potential for spiritual vocation and encourage them to go for seminary studies. Only locally grown spiritual leadership will be able to understand the lives of these young people and adequately address their needs. For this to happen, however, the ethnic church needs to let go of its self-focus and its dependence and reliance on Mother Church from India. It must reach out to the mainstream denominations for joint and collaborative work at least among young people. In the next chapter, I shall attempt to suggest some possible ways for the mainstream church to be part of this enterprise of ministering with the immigrant communities and second-generation young people.

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Chapter VI

Toward A Multicultural Ministry

In the preceding chapter I have sought to provide a theological rationale for the racial and spiritual identity development of second-generation young people, first by examining the cultural conditions in which they experience their lives, and then, by connecting their experience to the scriptural archetypes. I have also sought to establish how assisting second-generation young people in the formation of their racial and spiritual identity itself becomes the task of ethnic youth ministry. However, so far we have talked about this ministry only from the perspective of the ethnic church. In this concluding chapter, I intend to move our discussion of ethnic youth ministry from a strictly ethnic church program to a mainstream church initiative. Here, what I suggest is not based on any survey or scientific research, but is shaped by what I have read and by what I have observed as a person who has one foot in an ethnic church and another in the mainstream church. Of course, this new perspective would call for a radical shift in our understanding of the territorial and jurisdictional claims of both the ethnic and mainstream churches. It would also mean that further research and focused study will be needed for this initiative to be effective.

State of the Mainstream Church

In both acculturation and socialization, the mainstream church lags behind mainstream society. Schools and colleges, offices and assembly lines, marketplaces and high tech industries all show a more integrated image of the American population than do

the pews of a church on a regular Sunday morning. Ethnic restaurants in our cities and towns are frequented not just by their respective ethnic groups but by all. The cars we drive, clothes we wear, electronic items we use, medicine we practice, and even some of the words we use regularly all carry distinct ethnic cultural markings. However, these multicultural experiences of our everyday life are worlds away when we come to worship on a Sunday morning. Reflecting on the implication of the homogeneity of churches for the young people, Robert Wuthnow states:

Still another implication is that church increasingly becomes an enclave over against a more heterogeneous world. Young people go to church because that is the best place to associate with other Korean Americans, or with other white middle-class Anglos. Most churches are quite homogeneous; in comparison, the schools are not. And there is value in being able to associate with people like oneself. But young people will also realize at some point that the church has become out of step with the wider world. They will look back on the church of their youth, and they will be embarrassed by its parochialism.¹

In this regard, one challenge for the churches, whether mainstream or ethnic, is to provide a culturally affirming and theologically inclusive place for worship as well as a source of inspiration for multicultural living.

Another challenge facing churches today comes from market-oriented globalism. With the collapse of communism, capitalism has emerged as the sole winner. With no ideology or system of values or beliefs strong enough to compete with, market capitalism has taken over the task of homogenization of the world. Today, American music and movies, television, ideas and information are flooding the world, threatening the viability of local cultures with very little resistance. In his discussion of the negative impact of American culture, Joe Holland points out,

...modern American culture – with its powerful techno-scientific commitment to autonomous definitions of freedom and progress-may also be destroying the ecological, social, and religious foundations of the life system on planet earth. Modern American freedom and progress may be producing their dialectical opposites. The global culture may be emerging only to face the death of all life at every level from the womb to the planet. In the meantime, American culture seems to be propagandizing the world with a trivialized definition of sexuality and massive celebration of violence.²

The church no longer exerts the influence and power it once had in the world. The church has also lost its role as a critical voice, because very often it is associated with Western capitalism and values. With its role diminished and identity maligned, the question for the church today is how it can continue to be a spiritual, moral and social force, and offer itself to free people from the grip of dehumanizing forces in the world. Young people increasingly fall victim to modern market forces as the advertising industry exploits their vulnerability to fashion and trends. Worship and Bible studies are no match for the shopping malls and music concerts in competing for their attention. The ethnic churches are also beginning to see this trend as young people stay away from church. Getting young people to show a sustained interest in the church and its activities is a task for both the mainstream and the ethnic churches.

Another major challenge that confronts the church confronts hits close to home - our spirituality itself. The church no longer holds any monopoly in being the only provider of spirituality. The church has been reduced to one of the players in the marketplace of spirituality, expected to justify its claim on people as a keeper of morality and spirituality in America. In the ever-so-crowded marketplace of spirituality, the church is forced to employ modern techniques of advertising to get the attention of a

spiritually inclined public. It can no longer count on a traditional market share to sell its 'commodity.' Citing an article in the World Policy Journal, Litonjua writes,

What may be worse is that 'the church may well respond by reconfiguring itself into something of a knockoff of the culture industries,' by embracing the advertising and marketing strategies of Madison Avenue in hyping the gospel. The Pope has already entered the ranks of big-advance authors in the employ of global publishers, and has become the pitchman of a multimedia package for the rosary (video and compact disc) in television, radio, and print ads. The danger is the "Disneyfication of Catholicism," the promised kingdom of God blending into Disney's Magic Kingdom-'a promise fulfilled in the here and now, and one with abundant merchandising and shopping opportunities.'³

However, the breakup of religious monopoly has not affected regular church attendance as much as was once thought, according to Robert Wuthnow. He says what has changed is the people's reliance on 'wider ways' in seeking spiritual inspiration.⁴

Young people's interest in spirituality is also shaped in the same marketplace where they see their parents shop. As Wuthnow states,

Young people may have little interest in all this; much of it, after all, is for middle-aged baby boomers going through a midlife crisis. But young people also live in a spiritual marketplace. They see their parents searching all over the map. They know more about the Bible from movies than they do from attending church. They take "spiritual inventory" tests in *Seventeen* magazine. And they dabble at ouija boards and crystals and pyramids.⁵

What we see happening in the erosion of the church's once singular hold on spirituality is an outcome of yet another social phenomenon sweeping across the world, post-modernism. One of the chief characteristics of post-modernism is that the concept of 'one center' no longer has any validity, supplanted by multi-centered reality and a world of permanent motion and instability. As to how young people view their being in such a world, Martin E. Marty writes, "Most youth are overwhelmed by the relativism

that come with postmodern observance.”⁶ And as to how they seek their identity and spirituality, he says,

In their search for their vocation, their way has its own decisive stamp, they are involved as are so many adults today in establishing some sort of identity in a world of flux. They seek some measure of authority in the midst of relativism and relativity. They want some spiritual experience, not merely to be told about spiritual experience.

No youth counselors or elders can come onto such a scene and find a ready audience of young people who will give privileged access to churchly authority or traditional texts.⁷

Caught between the homogenizing forces of market-driven globalism and the decentralizing influences of post-modernity, the church today finds itself in a situation similar to that faced by the early church. Much of the known world in the early centuries of Christendom was under the homogenizing sway of Roman rule. At the same time, early Christians lived their faith amid a society exposed to a plethora of religious beliefs, philosophical ideas and spiritual systems. Paul’s letter to the Corinthian Christians says,

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-as in fact there are many gods and many lords-yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.⁸

The ethnic church also is not immune from the influences dogging the mainstream church. Perhaps the ethnic church may be undergoing even more turbulence, as it has only recently crossed over geographically from a traditional society to a modern society. The task of youth ministry today is to provide young people a stable mooring within a faith community as they make their voyage through the uncertainties of these times of change.

A Common Challenge

In the previous chapter, I identified four sets of particular cultural conditions that characterize the formation of racial and spiritual identity of ethnic young people of our study, namely, pilgrimage and homelessness, expectation and vocation, faith and action, and identity and identification. And in this chapter, so far, I have reviewed the challenges the mainstream church faces, namely, resistance to changing the dominant status from within, and globalism and post-modernism from without. A careful analysis of the cultural conditions of both the ethnic and the mainstream church reveals that the resulting situation is similar in nature for both groups. The difference between the two is one of location of their lived experience. Ethnic young people experience their marginality or homelessness on the borders, whereas mainstream youth experience their increasing marginality within the existing power system. On the marginality of the young people of the mainstream church, Sheryl A. Kujawa observes:

There are no mysterious reasons why young people so often fail to participate in congregational life. For the most part, they are not welcome, and in many instances there are no opportunities for meaningful participation. Perhaps there is no room in the liturgical life of the congregation for the contributions of young people, or the language itself seems irrelevant, or the concepts do not apply to daily life. This pattern will be reversed only when our congregations take seriously the evangelization of young people in all aspects of its life.⁹

The young people's sense of alienation comes from the lack of understanding and mentoring they receive from within their faith community. Young people in their teen years experience enormous pressure from the competing demands society has placed on them. This is the time they are vulnerable and in need of connection from the adults and other members of their faith community. It is the time the church needs to provide the

young people with a spiritual home. However, the church has neglected to carry out its vocation of ministering to the young people at a time of crucial importance. It is no wonder that they leave church in droves after confirmation. Ethnic young people would do the same except that they have nowhere else to go, a unique problem of living in the border. They are too lonely to leave the church community and too frightened to cross the border.

Both groups of young people take their faith seriously, to the point that they want to experience it personally in their own lives. Faith and action go hand in hand. Liturgy cannot be separated from social action. Symbols and rituals that may make sense to the parents' generation do not carry the same meaning without being understood and experienced in the lived reality of the second generation in the here and now. Perhaps what they think of the disconnection between the talk and the walk is best expressed in a speech made by Richard Shaull in 1966:

Our traditional discussions about God, his otherness and his sovereignty, may make little sense today, but we describe the freedom, openness and hope that are possible in a world over which he is Lord. A new generation may not pay attention to our former complicated discussions of eschatology, but they might be interested in an apocalyptic perspective on the present world that combined a sense of urgency about revolutionary change, the acceptance of the possibility of deepening crisis and tension in the present order, and expectant appropriation of new responsibilities precisely in the midst of this crisis. We may not talk much about Jesus Christ, but we can point to his concrete benefits in the midst of our lives today. And out of this openness to crucifixion, a new theological resurrection may once again take place.¹⁰

On the question of expectation and vocation, experiences are similar for both groups. Their respective faith communities have conflicting expectations of them. They work and live in an environment that sends out competing and contradictory messages to

them. However, in terms of support, very little is provided by their communities, neither mentors nor role models. Parents often find it difficult to accept their children's decision to live out their own callings and commitments. Yet the institutional church is alarmed at the lack of young people seeking ministry as a vocation. Kujawa notes,

Currently, however, the median age of Episcopal Church seminarians is thirty-nine and is in no danger of falling. Because younger people in their twenties with vocations to the ordained ministry are not welcome in many of our dioceses, they go elsewhere to exercise their leadership skills.¹¹

In the case of the ethnic young people our study represents, the expectation of the community is that they seek careers in lucrative professions rather than follow a commitment for the common good. Second-generation young people of this community seek ordained ministry extremely rarely as it is not terribly welcomed either by the community or the church hierarchy.

As in the case of vocation, the community's expectation of young people is that they identify with the dominant and powerful. The socialization process of the dominant community encourages its young people to stay within their social milieu and maintain their social standing and status. The ethnic community, despite its marginal status, encourages its young people to strive for associations with institutions of power and influence. Again, it is a matter of where one is placed within the hierarchy of power, not a question of commitment for the common good. Young people object to this outlook initially but later on fall victim to the majority view of social maintenance.

A Common Ground

The similarities in conditions experienced by young people in both the ethnic church community of our study and the mainstream church community call for a search

for common ground. Even in this post-modern era, the church finds itself offering moral leadership and spiritual vision for the wider society. However, among the positions the church expects the rest of the society to follow are some which it does not seem to follow itself.

For our discussion, let us take the issue of segregated worship. The church promotes desegregated public schools and housing; however, the spiritual home it has absolute control over is probably the most segregated among all public institutions. As the church expects and argues for a multicultural institution, let the church itself function as a multicultural church. A multicultural approach is called for not only for rhetorical consistency but also because it is in accord with the scriptural concept of the household of God. In their search for identity, whether it is racial, spiritual, gender, or ethnic, young people need a common ground to work this out, not divided and separated enclaves. If the youth ministry of the church is in working with young people to help them find their true identity, an inclusive framework is called for. I propose three ideas for our consideration:

A Cross-cultural Experience

In her book, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”* Beverly Daniel Tatum talks about racial identity development. She uses ‘the black table’ as a metaphor for the emergence of black identity. In achieving an understanding and affirmation of one’s own racial identity, the role one’s own racial group plays is crucially important. However, this group unity is a luxury for most of the second-generation young people of our study, a tiny minority separated in different schools. It is difficult for them to find any community of their own group. For them their ethnic church can provide

the community they need and long for. If the ethnic church can live up to its calling and expectation, these young people can have both their racial and their religious needs met. However, for these young people to end their journey here is not to live up to their calling either. Having been fed and nourished, young people are called to enter a wider arena, perhaps to cross the borders and to engage and experience the other.

While ethnic young people are being emboldened to do border crossing from the margins as a youth group, the mainstream church can prepare its young people to welcome them for a cross-cultural experience. Some of our churches send their young people to other countries for a cross-cultural experience. Without crossing the geographical borders and spending thousands of dollars, one can cross cultural barriers right here within one's own diocese. However, for this to happen, the youth leaders from both sides must work together in collaborative manner.

A Multicultural Campus Ministry

Once the ethnic young people graduate from high school and go to college, they are without a faith community. However, unlike the schools they went to in their suburbs, in college they can find many young people belonging to the same ethnic community. It is a familiar sight in a college cafeteria to see young people belonging to the same ethnic group sit at the same table, much like the table of empowerment Tatum discusses in her work. As they "hang out" and "chill" at these South Asian Tables (SATs) in the college cafeteria, education for the future is taking place. This is where they learn all that stuff about life and identity not taught in classes. However, for most, college life can be spiritually very challenging. That a culturally sensitive and identity-affirming

“spiritual home” in college is unavailable to young people must be a matter of great concern for the church.

I suggest that the mainstream church, which has the resources, make its existing campus ministry more welcoming to ethnic students. For most people, students of Indian ethnic origin are Hindus. However, that is far from the reality. There are a large number of Indian students from Christian families who are in college. Ethnic churches do not have the wherewithal to support a campus minister in each campus where there are ethnic Christian students. About the need for evangelization in college campuses, Kujawa says:

Recent studies also suggest the importance of ministries in higher education in the task of the evangelization of young people. Gallup polls have confirmed that young people begin leaving the church between the ages of twelve and sixteen. Though young people tend to make faith commitments in their teenage and young adult years, the Alban Institute has determined that they do not automatically return to the church once they have left, ‘unless room is made for them and invitation extended in that period between the ages eighteen and twenty-nine when the urge to commitments comes.’ Moreover, other statistics suggest that over fifty percent of those who affiliate with the Episcopal Church in adulthood do so through the ministry of higher education.¹²

The presence of a multicultural campus ministry on our university and college campuses would be a natural addition to an educational institution. Ministering to ethnic students involves affirming their racial and spiritual identity. The viability of some of the ethnic churches beyond the first-generation immigrants is increasingly tenuous due to their undue reliance on Mother Church back home. When some of these ethnic young people go back to their ethnic community years later, the church may not be there. A multicultural mainstream church in the community will become the future spiritual home for many of the ethnic students on college campuses today.

A Multicultural Church

There was a time when the mainstream church was involved in the socialization process of new immigrants into mainstream American life. However, accused of cultural hegemony, the church has kept itself back from this task of socialization of newer arrivals. Once again, having achieved sophisticated understanding of what is being multicultural, the church needs to be involved in this socialization process with new sensitivity. Moreover, the mainstream church will acquire multicultural sensitivity as a result of itself undergoing a radical change in its makeup and becoming itself truly multicultural. It cannot be the same as it was in the past. It has to be multicultural both in outlook and in composition. Reflecting on the mistakes of the past, David N. Power envisions how pluralism has to be fostered in an appropriate manner:

In brief, in the U. S. American church that embraces many cultural groups how do we begin to find the ways to acknowledge the otherness of the other, and to consider the present in the frank light of the suppression of otherness in the past. Cultural pluralism is thus the issue of taking respect for the other, the demands that follow from respect for the other, and reconciliation with the other, as the basis for communion and unity in Jesus Christ. Only from this can a communion within cultural diversity ensue.¹³

It must reflect more and more the image of the concept of the household of God where everyone is equally valued and everyone's difference is counted as a gift and affirmed. In the household of God no one is left out; everyone lives in full respect for one another. The household of God can be likened to the household of the father who embraced his prodigal (marginalized) son and asked his older (insider) son to enter into the joyful celebration of being back together as one family again.

The crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost reflects the nature and make up of a multicultural church. People speaking different tongues, belonging to different parts of the world and races all heard the good news proclaimed. No one was left out from hearing God's word. The birth of the church on the day of Pentecost marked the beginning of a movement from what was until then a monochrome to multi-chrome and monolingual to multilingual. It was a reconciled diversity at work.

Multicultural church, demonstrated on the day of Pentecost in the Acts of Apostles, described as the body of Christ and household of God in the epistles, is a visible sign of God's grace in building faith communities of reconciled diversity. As the mainstream church in a multicultural society responds to God's call to serve, the church will become multicultural both in its outlook and in its ministry. The church will have multicultural staff like the early church had, not as tokens nor to fulfill certain quotas. A multicultural mainstream church will also actively and sensitively search for collaborative ministry with ethnic churches in the community. D. Power is to the point when he says,

Reflection on the past, as it affected both the oppressed and immigrants of European origin, can open up new ways for receiving these communities with due respect for their cultural diversity, and with due regard for their rights, and with due attitudes of hospitality to their own distinctive ways of being.¹⁴

The second –generation young people, even though they grew up in ethnic churches, are multicultural in their outlook and will find mainstream multicultural churches to their liking. Given the theological mandate, and the harvest field of ministry being so ripe and plentiful, the mainstream church has no option but to be multicultural. Peter interpreted

his revelation in Joppa as follows: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."¹⁵

These are three ways among many the mainstream church can be involved in the ministry with the second-generation ethnic young people. The cross-cultural encounter I suggested can be implemented on a local level between the mainstream congregations and ethnic congregations in a community. As a first step, the youth groups from both mainstream and ethnic churches decide on occasional joint programs in the community. Depending on how successfully these joint efforts go, other local church groups from both mainstream and ethnic churches such as men's group, women's group, etc, would begin collaborative efforts in ministry. These efforts could eventually lead to occasional joint worship services. Young people whether ethnic or mainstream, growing up in this environment of close cooperation between churches, will develop a healthy attitude towards church and an understanding of themselves. This is essential to the development of a healthy religious and racial identity.

The multicultural campus ministry would provide opportunities for young people from both mainstream and ethnic communities common forum for discussion on topics of mutual interest. However, young people may find common involvement in community service more interesting and meaningful. Moreover, such involvement may help them discern their future vocation and develop a vision for themselves and society. Higher education must go beyond training young people to be technocrats. A multicultural campus ministry may provide young people the essentials needed to develop a healthy identity, build skills for relational living, and foster global understanding.

As the American society is fast becoming a multicultural, the mainstream church cannot abdicate its responsibility of being the leader. The mainstream church should show its intent not only in making public pronouncements, but also in reflecting this in the way it conducts its business. It must initiate conversations with ethnic churches that are operating within the diocesan territory and see how then can enter into mutuality in ministry and missions.

Conclusion: An All Embracing Household of God

We have observed how church is central to the life of the Indian Christian ethnic community in the United States. It has taken on more significance to the ethnic community than it had in the country of origin. We have all also seen how the particular context of the ethnic congregations where the young people of our study come from shape the contour of their lives. Given the right kind of ministry and leadership, these particular contexts can be used positively by employing Biblical archetypes to build racial and religious identities for the young people. However, due to the nature of ethnic churches and their primary concern for the first-generation immigrants, the young people and their needs are often overlooked.

This study makes a suggestion that the ethnic and mainstream churches work together in ministering to the second-generation young people under the rubric of a multicultural church. We have also observed how striking are the similarities of multicultural church to the household of God. Just as Abraham set out from his familiar ancestral home to a promised land, today's ethnic and mainstream churches are on a pilgrimage to become a church of God where everyone whether Jew or gentile, ethnic or

mainstream, male or female will be embraced. The road towards that goal may be uncertain and perilous, however, it is a journey the church must take.

We live in hope for a future when the concept of the household of God will become the operating principle of the church, where both the once-marginalized and once-privileged journey together as members of the same household in the pilgrimage. In this pilgrimage, let us forego our fear of “the other”; instead let us embrace “the other” and become transformed.

End Notes

¹ Robert Wuthnow, “Youth And Culture in American Society: The Social Context of Ministry to Teenagers” in *Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry*: Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, And Culture (Institute for Youth Ministry: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996), p.73 cited in M. D. Litonjua, *Global Capitalism: The New Context of Christian Social Ethics*, *Theology Today*, Vol.56 No.2), p223.

² Joe Holland, *Faith and Culture: An Historic Moment for the American Catholic Laity?* American and Catholic: The New Debate, ed. Joe Holland and Anne Barsanti (South Orange, NJ: Pillar, 1988), 27

³ M. D. Litonjua, *Global Capitalism: The New Context of Christian Social Ethics*, *Theology Today*, Vol.56 No.2), p225.

⁴ Robert Wuthnow, “Youth And Culture in American Society: The Social Context of Ministry to Teenagers” in *Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry*: Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, And Culture (Institute for Youth Ministry: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996), p.72

⁵ *Ibid.*, 72

⁶ Martin E. Marty, “Youth between Late Modernity and Postmodernity,” in *Growing Up Postmodern: Imitating Christ in the Age of ‘whatever’* Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, Institute For Youth Ministry, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1998), p.36.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.36.

⁸1 Cor. 8. 5-6 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).

⁹Sheryl A. Kujawa, *Disorganized Religion*, ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa (Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1998) p. 228.

¹⁰Richard Shaull, "The Revolutionary Challenge to Church and Theology" in *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, eds. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1977), p.303.

¹¹Kujawa, *Disorganized Religion*, 228.

¹² Ibid., 225

¹³David N. Power, O. M. I. "Communion within Pluralism In the Local Church: Maintaining Unity in Process of Inculturation" in *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U. S. Theologies* ed. William Cenkner (Paulist Press: New York/Mahwah, N. J. 1996), p.80.

¹⁴Ibid., P.82.

¹⁵Acts of the Apostles: 10:34-35.

APPENDIX

Interview Format

Introduction

I consciously tried to keep my interviews open-ended. I used the following questions as guidelines to elicit the information from the young people. I visited most of them at their homes in private space with very little interruptions or interferences from outside. After a brief explanation about the project, I went right into the interview. The time of the interview ranged anywhere between half-an-hour to an hour.

I. Society

Factual

Were you born in this country, if so, where and when?

If not, where were you born and when did you come to this country?

When did your parents come to this country?

Are you a citizen?

Are your parents citizens? If not, what's their status?

Do you have siblings?

Where do you go to school?

What level of education your parents have reached? Are they currently in school?

What kind of community you live? Is it diverse?

Attitudinal

What kind of conflicts you face in society?

What are the main points of contact in society?

- a. School
- b. Outside school
- c. Community
- d. Church

How close are you with your friends from school, community and church?

Do you feel that you have any influence on them, and do they have any influence on you?

How do the adults (parents and influential elders) respond to you about your contacts, friends? Do they encourage or discourage?

How do you identify yourself to people?

Indian, American, Asian Indian, person of color, Keralite, Malayali, Christian, etc. Why so?

Do you see any shift in your identification of yourself? Fluidity, multilayered identities.

How do you feel about your identity, is it threatening or assuring?

What is your fall back position?

What role does the church play in this liminal or threshold experiences?

II. Church

Factual

Where do you go to worship?

Only Indian? Why

How much are you involved in the church activities?

What kind of activities at the church you're really interested?

Where were you baptized, confirmed, how many times you take communion?

Attitudinal

How comfortable are you in the church?

What aspects of church are you happy with and why?

Between all that goes on in the church, what satisfies your needs?

What needs of yours are met, and why?

What are your hopes for the church to meet your needs for belonging?

Is it a place where you can be who you are?

Do you sense a feeling of belonging?

Are your value, worth and gifts are affirmed?

III. Identity Formation

Racial and Faith formations

What role does your faith play in crossing borders, as supportive mechanism?

Where do you get much your faith from?

How personally satisfying is the church for you?

1. It provides a comfort zone
2. A community where you can meet people
3. Motivates one for living in the world
4. To live life and for whom (multiple choice)

How does church address your status as immigrant?

What are some of the programs that addresses these issues?

What are the hindrances and obstacles?

Dichotomous problem?

What relevance faith has to orient yourself in a multicultural environment?

Sheltered existence in conflict filled milieu?

Indian youth living a predominantly American culture?

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